

THE
INVESTIGATORS
in
THE MYSTERY OF THE
ISLE OF OBLIVION





in

**THE MYSTERY
OF THE
ISLE OF OBLIVION**

Without informing any of his family members, Pete's grandfather moves to stay in a retirement home. Pete only finds out when the home calls saying that his grandfather is missing. Then the local TV news reports an old man robbing a petrol station and Pete clearly recognizes the robber as his grandfather. Together with Jupiter and Bob, The Three Investigators proceed to search for the missing man. However, they are at a loss as to why Pete's grandfather is even at that retirement home in the first place.

The Three Investigators
in
The Mystery of the Isle of Oblivion

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(The Three ???: Isle of Oblivion)

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1. Home Alone at the Crenshaws

When Pete Crenshaw woke up, the sun was high in the sky and shining in his face through the window. Normally, the gurgling of the coffee machine and the clatter of dishes in the kitchen woke him. Today, however, they didn't. The house was silent.

Then it came back to him—his parents were visiting old friends on the East Coast. They had left the night before and would be away for a few days.

Home alone at last!

Pete was suddenly wide awake! He threw back the covers, jumped out of bed, ran down the stairs into the living room, and switched on the stereo. He turned up the volume, the bass as well to be on the safe side, then pressed play.

The first guitar riff made the glasses in the cupboard clink. When the singer of his new favourite band shouted 'Let's rock this house!', the walls shook.

Pete jumped into the air with his legs bent, sang along at the top of his lungs and played air guitar.

That's exactly what he would now do every morning the next few days—also every afternoon and every evening and every night if he felt like it. He would eat chips on the sofa, watch TV until late at night and play on the computer for as long as he wanted. Pete was in paradise.

He threw on the cooker and made himself a small mountain of pancakes. After drowning them in a lake of maple syrup, he plopped down on the couch with the plate, turned off the music and switched on the TV, zapping through the channels while eating breakfast.

He had just reached a local news station when the phone rang.

"Pete Crenshaw," he announced as he turned down the sound on the television.

"Good morning, Mr Crenshaw, this is Sandra Martinez from Sunny Isle Retirement Centre in Oxnard. Are you the son-in-law of Mr Bennington Peck?"

"Er, no," Pete said, confused. "His grandson."

"I see. Are your parents available?"

"Not at the moment, they are travelling."

Sandra Martinez hesitated only briefly. "The thing is this—your grandfather has been missing since yesterday. Of course, he can basically stay wherever he wants, but we're worried that something might have happened to him. Do you know where your grandfather is? You could tell him that if he's going to be away for some time, we'd appreciate it if he could inform the nursing staff so no one has to worry."

Pete's forehead was so furrowed that it almost hurt. "I'm afraid I don't understand what you are talking about. Where did you say you are calling from?"

"From Sunny Isle Retirement Centre."

Pete laughed uncertainly. "That sounds like a nursing home."

"We prefer the term 'retirement home'."

"So what exactly does my grandfather have to do with your retirement home?"

"Well, he lives here."

Again Pete laughed. "There must be some mistake. My grandfather doesn't live in a retirement home. He lives in his own house in Rocky Beach. Maybe there's another

Bennington Peck.”

“Oh,” said Miss Martinez in surprise. “Well, that would be possible, of course. Just a moment, I’ll bring up his details.” Miss Martinez told Pete his grandfather’s birthday and place of birth.

“That is both correct,” Pete said uncertainly, “but you must still be mistaken. My grandfather lives here in Rocky Beach and definitely not with you. I should know that.”

“Well, that’s rather strange,” Miss Martinez said thoughtfully. “Perhaps your grandfather could contact us anyway so we can clear up the matter? After all, if it’s a mix-up, he’ll know best.”

“I can make sure of that,” Pete said.

Sandra Martinez gave him the telephone number of the retirement home, then she said goodbye and hung up.

Pete was firmly convinced that it was all a mistake. Nevertheless, he called his grandfather’s mobile phone, but it went into voicemail. This often happened because Grandpa kept misplacing his mobile phone and then forgot that he even had one. So Pete didn’t leave a message, and then he tried calling his grandpa’s landline.

The answering machine picked up. “This is Ben Peck. If this stupid machine isn’t broken, you can leave a message now.” It beeped.

“Hello, Grandpa, this is Pete. A woman from a retirement home just called. She said you were living there and had gone missing. You should call them. I didn’t quite get it. Do you know what it’s about? Why don’t you call me back?”

Next, Pete decided to call his parents. Maybe they knew something he didn’t. However, his mother didn’t answer her mobile phone and Pete didn’t feel like leaving a message on voicemail. He could try again later.

A little perplexed, Pete looked at the TV and tried to make sense of the whole story when he saw something that made him freeze.

A report came on the news about a robbery at a petrol station. Pete watched the images from a surveillance camera in disbelief and hastily reached for the remote control to turn up the sound.

“... The unidentified man threatened a customer with a gun and then forced the petrol station attendant to empty the cash register. The robber took the money and fled without further incident. This took place in the late afternoon. The surveillance camera footage is the only clue Ventura police have at this time.”

While the newsreader was describing the case, the jerky footage from the surveillance camera was shown in a continuous loop. It was only a few seconds of footage. The video quality was poor, and the armed robber could only be seen from above.

Nevertheless, there was no doubt in Pete’s mind—the man who had robbed the petrol station in Ventura was his grandfather!

2. Emergency Meeting

Even when the weather forecast was already on, Pete was still staring at the TV. He couldn't believe what he had just seen! It was simply impossible.

When his mobile phone rang, Pete winced. The police! That must have been the police, looking for Grandpa! But one look at the display told him that it was his mother... and that was actually even worse.

The phone continued to ring.

He simply wouldn't answer it but then, she could worry. After all, he had just called her. If he spoke to her now, he couldn't possibly tell her what he had just seen! She could completely freak out and then get on the next flight home immediately! What could happen if it turned out to be just a stupid mistake?

It was still ringing.

A mistake, exactly. It had to be a mistake, everything else was complete nonsense. That's exactly why Pete didn't have to tell her anything.

One more ring and the voicemail would come on.

The Second Investigator answered the call. "Hello?"

"Hello, son. You just called me. I heard the ringing too late. What's up? Is everything alright?"

Pete swallowed. "Uh..."

"Uh what?"

"Uh, yeah! Yeah, sure, everything's fine."

"I see... so why did you call then?"

"I... just wanted to know how you guys are doing. How's the weather in New York?"

"Not as good as California. Are you sure everything's okay? You don't sound like it."

"Yes, yes. I just burnt a pancake." Pete rattled his plate. "It's a bit messy at the moment."

His mother laughed. "Day one of 'Home Alone with Pete' and already something is on fire, right?"

"Something like that."

"Well, I won't bother you any longer with your renovation work," Mrs Crenshaw said. "You'll let me know if you need anything, won't you?"

"Sure."

"Your father and I are about to meet Kate and John and then we're going to the museum."

"Great! Have fun!"

"You too. See you!"

Pete hung up and took a deep breath. The television report had run on a local station. His parents won't be able to see it in New York—unless it made the national news. He had to call the station and make sure the report was never shown again! He had to find Grandpa! He had to find out what was going on in the first place! He had to... he had to... he had to get to Jupiter and Bob right away!

Within no time, Pete called his friends for an emergency meeting at Headquarters and reported the shocking news. Jupiter had the idea to watch the TV report again on the Internet.

A short time later, Jupiter, Bob and Pete sat in the darkness of their secret hideout—an old mobile home trailer hidden under piles of scrap metal, and gazed intently at the computer screen.

Bob broke the silence after they had watched the short video footage. “Yes, that’s your grandpa.”

“Really?” asked Pete, who had secretly hoped of being mistaken.

Bob and Jupe nodded at the same time.

“That can’t be!” cried Pete. “Why would he rob a petrol station? He has a gun in his hand! Grandpa doesn’t own a gun at all!”

“When did you last see him?” asked Jupiter.

Pete thought for a moment. “Three weeks ago, maybe. He was with us for dinner.”

“Did you notice anything unusual about him?”

Slowly Pete shook his head.

“Did he say anything to you, by any chance?”

“He said a lot of things to me, Jupe,” the Second Investigator replied indignantly, “but nothing that would explain this! What am I supposed to do now? I have to do something!”

“Well,” Bob muttered. “Strictly speaking, you should go to the police.”

“What? No way!”

Bob cleared his throat uncomfortably. “But you have identified a wanted criminal.”

Pete immediately went straight to the ceiling. “A wanted criminal? My grandpa is not a criminal!”

“No, he’s not, Pete,” Bob agreed, “but he is irritable and argumentative, and he tends to get into fights with just about anybody. Anyway, I can already imagine that there was some sort of argument at that petrol station and—”

“Nonsense,” Pete interrupted his friend. “That’s nonsense, Bob, and you know it. Grandpa would never go after anyone with a gun! There’s something else behind it. That’s as clear as daylight!”

“Only what?” asked Jupiter. “Is there any clue at all?”

“Yes, there is,” said Pete, “or maybe not. It probably has nothing to do with it at all. This morning a woman from a retirement home called me.” He told his friends about the conversation with Sandra Martinez. “That’s utter nonsense, of course. Grandpa doesn’t live in any retirement home. It must be a mix-up.”

“A mix-up, perhaps,” Jupiter confessed, “but probably not a coincidence. First your grandfather allegedly went missing from a retirement home he didn’t live in, and then he robbed a petrol station. These two incidents are so extraordinary that I have to believe in a connection.”

“So what kind of connection do you believe in?” asked Pete.

“I’m afraid that’s a complete mystery to me,” Jupiter confessed.

“Maybe the robber is someone who looks like Mr Peck,” Bob mused.

“It’s possible,” Jupiter said. “The best thing now is to go to his house. Pete, you haven’t been there yet, have you?”

The Second Investigator shook his head. “I just called him, but he didn’t seem to be there. After that, I came straight here.”

“Then we’ll go there now and check. The fact that he didn’t answer the phone could have many reasons.” Jupiter rose from his chair.

“Agreed,” Pete said, half relieved, half trepidatious. He was glad that they were doing something. At the same time, he had to admit to himself that he was afraid of what they might find out.

Bennington Peck’s house was in a quiet residential area of Rocky Beach. It was less than five minutes by car from the salvage yard.

Pete parked his car, went to the door and rang the bell. He listened intently, but nothing moved inside. He hoped that Grandpa was at home and would clear up the whole story.

Pete tried the door, but it was locked. “Let’s go to the back,” he muttered and entered the narrow strip of lawn between the house and the hedge that separated it from the neighbouring property. At the back, there was a small garden and a tool shed that also served as a workshop. The lawn looked quite battered.

Ben Peck was a passionate inventor. One of his latest inventions had been an automatic lawn mower, but it kept causing problems. Countless test runs had left a plucked grass surface full of bare patches. In fact, when it was last operated, the mower had clattered on its own to the road and terrified the children playing there.

The Three Investigators peered through the glass of the back door into the interior of the house, but no one was to be seen. Pete knocked loudly. Nothing happened.

“Given the circumstances, do you think it’s reasonable for us to check inside?” Jupiter asked the Second Investigator. “Maybe we’ll find a clue to your grandpa’s whereabouts. Do you know if he keeps a spare key somewhere?”

Pete nodded. “Yes. It’s under one of those pots over there. Despite being an inventor, Grandpa wasn’t very creative when it came to hiding his spare key.”

Pete walked over to a row of flower pots along the side of the house and began lifting them up one by one. He found the key in a small box underneath the third pot. He went to the back door, unlocked it and entered Ben Peck’s house.

No one was there, and everything looked like Pete knew it. There was always a slight chaos in Grandpa’s house. On the writing table and the coffee table were mountains of notes, craftsman’s journals and sketches. On the wall in the living room hung newspaper clippings of articles reporting on the successes of The Three Investigators. Ben Peck was in fact very proud of his grandson.

The Three Investigators made a short round through the ground floor and took a look in every room, but there was nothing conspicuous to be found.

Pete sighed. “Everything’s normal as if Grandpa had just stepped out of the house for a moment... and I was so hoping we’d find a clue.”

“You’re wrong, Pete,” Jupiter said from the kitchen. “It doesn’t look as if your grandpa only left the house for a moment.”

Pete frowned. “No?”

“No. I have come to know your grandfather as a person who is not exactly characterized by a great love for order and cleanliness.”

“As it is now, the house is not exactly neat,” Bob remarked.

“I don’t mean that... but there are no dirty dishes or cutlery in the sink.” Jupe then opened the fridge. It was completely empty apart from a few bottles of water. “No perishables. Ben Peck didn’t leave his house briefly. He had planned his departure, like he was going away for a long time.” He stroked his index finger across the tidy kitchen table, looking at the trail he’d left in the very, very fine layer of dust. “—And that was at least a fortnight ago, more like longer, I’d guess.”

Bob nodded thoughtfully. "You're right, Jupe."

"Not really," Pete contradicted. "My mother spoke to him on the phone and that was only a week ago."

"Was it on the mobile phone?" Bob pondered.

"She usually calls him at home because he keeps misplacing his mobile phone."

"Maybe he set up call forwarding. Your mother called him here, but he answered the call somewhere else."

Pete shook his head in perplexity. "I don't understand all this. Why would he go away without telling anyone? And why did he rob a petrol station?"

"The best thing to do is to see if we can find a clue among all these piles of paper—an itinerary, a plane ticket, or something like that."

They mainly found drawings and sketches of the strange things Pete's grandfather had been working on lately—a desk with telescopic legs that could adjust the height of the table at the push of a button; a Thermos flask with a heat indicator; a mini-robot that could evenly plant seeds in a vegetable patch. However, they found no evidence of a planned trip.

Pete discovered that the answering machine was blinking. Concern outweighed privacy so he played the messages. There were only two—his own, just over an hour old, and one from Sunny Isle Retirement Centre the day before. Pete recognized the voice of Sandra Martinez. She spoke in a very matter-of-fact manner and simply asked Mr Peck to call the retirement home.

Bob, who had been upstairs in the meantime, came back down. In his hand, he held a small stack of books. "I found something strange."

Pete looked up. "What?"

"Your grandfather's bedtime reading. These books were all on his bedside table." Bob showed them to him: *Senile Dementia—Causes, Diagnosis, Therapy*; *Grandpa in Neverland—Guidebook for Relatives of Dementia Patients*; *Alzheimer's: The Story of a Disease*.

Pete frowned. "What does that mean?"

"Dementia is a disease of the brain that mainly affects old people," Jupiter explained. "The brain no longer works properly. The symptoms are forgetfulness, confusion and sometimes pronounced personality changes. Alzheimer's disease is the most common cause of dementia."

"I know all that, Jupe," Pete said irritably, although he only really understood half of it. "—But why would Grandpa read something like that? It's not because he himself..." He did not finish the sentence.

Jupiter took the top volume from Bob, where there was a small card that served as a bookmark. He opened to bookmarked page, and it was in a chapter about the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease. He also noted that there was something written on the card.

"That's Grandpa's handwriting," Pete realized and looked at the bookmark more closely. "It says 'Sunny Isle', 'Neill: Block 3, 2-14' followed by three names—Maria da Silva, James Swift, and Martha Longingdale. Sunny Isle! That's the name of the retirement home. What does that—"

Pete fell silent in mid-sentence because he had heard a noise. All three paused and listened.

There was someone at the front door! And judging by the clattering and scraping of metal on metal, the person was trying to gain entry!

3. An Intruder!

Jupiter signalled to his friends to hide somewhere. Pete pressed himself against the wall behind the kitchen door. Bob scurried into the living room and ducked behind the couch, while Jupiter quietly opened the basement door under the stairs and slipped into the darkness. He left a narrow gap on the door just enough to peek out.

Someone was still tampering with the front door. Finally, the lock clicked and the door swung open. In the beam of sunlight that fell into the house, Jupe could make out the figure of an old man, rather thin and with short hair. He entered the house with a key in his hand and walked right past the basement door, straight towards the kitchen.

Jupiter recognized the man immediately... but before he could react, the man had entered the kitchen. Immediately afterwards, a blood-curdling scream echoed through the house!

Jupiter rushed out of his hiding place. In the kitchen, Pete and the man faced each other—the latter with his eyes widened in terror and a kitchen knife in his raised hand.

Now Bob stumbled in too and the intruder let out another scream.

“Mr Castro!” cried Pete, startled. “Mr Castro, calm down! It’s me, Pete Crenshaw!”

“Pete!” gasped Mr Castro, grabbing his heart with his free hand and finally lowering the knife. “What are you doing here? Why are you hiding behind the kitchen door? You almost gave me a heart attack!”

“I’m sorry about that, Mr Castro, I thought you were a burglar.” Pete pointed to his friends. “Do you remember Jupiter and Bob?”

“Uh... yeah...” Castro mumbled, still dazed and confused. “Jupiter and Bob... yeah, I remember you two.”

Mr Castro was Ben Peck’s neighbour, as well as his chess and poker buddy. He helped The Three Investigators before in a previous case. Pete now remembered that Mr Castro was quite hard of hearing and he resolved to speak louder from now on.

“We’re really sorry we scared you so much,” Pete said.

“Uh... I’m just a bit startled,” Mr Castro affirmed. “How did you guys get in here? Ben isn’t even here.”

“I know where he hid the spare key,” Pete explained. “Do you know where Grandpa is?”

Mr Castro winced slightly at this question. “Uh, no... I don’t know,” he said a bit too quickly.

“Are you sure?” Jupiter asked. “We suspect that he is away, and since you just entered his house with a key without ringing the bell, I assume that you are here to look after things and perhaps water the flowers. Am I right?”

Mr Castro looked at him, puzzled. “How do you know?”

“I have only drawn conclusions from my observations. So you do know where Mr Peck is?”

“No. I don’t know that. He didn’t tell me. He just asked me to go through his mail every few days and check his answering machine.”

“What for?” Jupe asked.

“Check his answering machine...”

“What for?” asked Jupe a little louder.

“To let him know if there’s anything important.”

“Then you know where to reach him?” asked Pete hopefully.

Mr Castro shook his head. “He contacts me every few days, but I don’t know where he is.”

Pete dropped his shoulders in disappointment. He briefly considered telling Mr Castro about the petrol station robbery but he knew that his grandfather’s neighbour was a very nervous, anxious person. This story would only worry him unnecessarily. Besides, he would probably tell it to the whole neighbourhood and then it was only a matter of time before someone called the police.

So Pete said: “We need to talk to him urgently. Don’t you have any clues as to where he might be? He must have said something.”

Mr Castro laughed bitterly. “He did. ‘Castro,’ he said, ‘I’ll be damned if I’m going to tell you what I’m up to. You’ll just blurt it out. Just empty my mailbox and wait until I get back. Then maybe I’ll tell you.’ He’s... well... not exactly the most polite person, your grandfather.”

“And when was that?” Jupiter wanted to know.

“Excuse me?”

“When was that?”

“Three weeks ago now.”

“Three weeks!” exclaimed Pete. “But my mother only spoke to him on the phone the other day!”

Mr Castro nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, your mother had left a message on the answering machine once. A day later, Ben called me. I gave him the message. I suppose that’s when he called her back.”

“—And concealed the fact that he wasn’t at home at all,” Bob concluded. “The question is—where is he?”

“I think we know the answer,” Jupiter said. “We just can’t make sense of it. Mr Castro, does the Sunny Isle Retirement Centre mean anything to you?”

“The retirement home in Oxnard? Why, yes, I know that one. Neill Hooper has been there for a few years. He used to live down the street and play poker with us. Then he went downhill and moved to Sunny Isle. It’s an expensive place, but I guess he can afford it. Why are you asking about that?”

“There are certain indications that Mr Peck may be there,” Jupe said.

Mr Castro raised his eyebrows in disbelief. “If he did visit Neill, it won’t take three weeks!”

“We don’t know anything for sure either,” Jupiter confessed, “but the fact that your mutual friend Neill Hooper lives there is a valuable clue! Do the names Maria da Silva, James Swift or Martha Longingdale also mean something to you?”

“Martha Lynn Day...” murmured Mr Castro, tapping his lip thoughtfully. “Like Doris Day?”

“No, Martha Longingdale,” Jupiter repeated aloud.

Castro shook his head slowly. “No, I don’t know.” Then he looked the boys in the eye one by one. “He’s in trouble, isn’t he? Ben, I mean. He’s been messing with someone again or doing something forbidden, am I right?”

Pete laughed nervously. “What makes you think of that?”

“I know what he’s like. Besides, he has already been arrested once... and there was the story with a neighbour back then...”

“That one little arrest was only because he didn’t want the tree in front of his house to be cut down,” said Pete, “and in the story with the neighbour, it wasn’t Grandpa who was the bad guy, it was the neighbour!”

Mr Castro didn’t seem to have listened to him at all. “He’s got himself in trouble again for sure! You’ll let me know if you find out anything, won’t you? Maybe you should have a word with Harry.”

“Harry Jacobson?” asked Pete, remembering another one of this grandfather’s friend.

Mr Castro nodded. “He’s also part of our poker circle. Maybe Ben told him something. He lives in Santa Barbara now though.”

“That’s a good idea,” Jupiter said. “Do you have Mr Jacobson’s number?”

“Yes,” Mr Castro replied, “but he’s half deaf by now and only hears the phone when he happens to be sitting next to it. The best thing is to go straight to him. Wait, I’ll write down his address for you.” He took a piece of paper and a pen from the kitchen table and wrote down the address.

“Thank you very much,” Jupiter said and pocketed the note. “We’ll be in touch if we find out something.”

“Agreed.”

The Three Investigators then said goodbye to Mr Castro. Together they left the house. Pete hid the key back under the flower pot. After Mr Castro had returned to his own house diagonally opposite, the boys discussed their next steps.

“We should do three things,” Jupe suggested. “Firstly, I would like to pay a visit to the retirement home in Oxnard.”

“I definitely want to go there!” said Pete quickly.

Jupiter nodded. “That leaves you, Bob, with the other two investigative tasks.”

“The petrol station in Ventura,” Bob said, “and a visit to Harry Jacobson.”

“Right, and we shouldn’t forget the three names your grandfather wrote down on his bookmark, Pete. So, we’d best check it out on the computer at Headquarters. We’ll meet there in the late afternoon for a meeting.”

4. Sunny Isle

Sunny Isle Retirement Centre was located on the small island of the same name, close off the coast of Oxnard. It was connected to the mainland by a bridge barely a hundred metres long.

Radiantly bright, the winding buildings rose up on the flat rocks. Wide curving wooden walkways led down to white beaches. Every open space was planted with splendidly blooming flowers. There were park benches and loungers everywhere, where elderly residents lay or dozed in the shade of the royal palms.

“Very stately,” Jupiter murmured after they had parked the car in the mainland car park. Then they walked across the bridge towards a barrier and a security booth at one side. The barrier was up and the security guard didn’t even look up from his newspaper.

With the help of an information board next to the barrier, Jupiter and Pete found out that the retirement home was in three building blocks. There was Block 1, where the residents lived completely independently in apartments. In Block 2, there were assisted living facilities for people who needed help in their daily lives; and in Block 3 was the nursing wards, where residents received round-the-clock care and medical attention. In this way, the residents could change living arrangements when their health deteriorated or improved without having to leave their familiar external surroundings.

The visitor reception was in Block 2. Jupiter and Pete made their way along winding paths. Finally, they went through an automatic glass door, behind which was the foyer and a brightly lit reception area.

It was nice and cool here. Soft birdsong emanated from hidden loudspeakers. Lush potted plants were everywhere. A tall, slim man in a blue overall was in the process of rearranging some of the tubs around a small seating area. A huge flat TV hung on one wall, showing a weather forecast board.

Just as they entered, a promotional video clip for Sunny Isle started on the TV. It showed cheerful elderly residents walking along the beach, playing lawn bowls and obviously having a good time. There were numerous leisure activities, first-class service, the best medical care and nursing staff who sacrificially looked after the residents, while the palm trees swayed in the gentle breeze and the surf roared around the clock.

Behind a dark hardwood counter, a middle-aged woman with her hair tied back tightly and a bird-of-prey nose sat working at a computer. A name tag on the lapel of her white coat read ‘Sandra Martinez’. She looked up and smiled as Jupiter and Pete approached her. “Good afternoon, what can I do for you?”

Pete cleared his throat. “I’m Pete Crenshaw. You called me this morning. It’s about Ben Peck.”

“Ah, of course! Mr Bennington Peck. Have you spoken to your grandfather?”

Pete shook his head. “No. I don’t know where he is... but I’m still sure it must be a case of mistaken identity. My grandpa doesn’t live here.”

Miss Martinez frowned for a moment. Then she pecked away at the keyboard. “Bennington Peck,” she said and turned the computer monitor so that Pete could take a look. Along with his grandfather’s name and birth details, there was a photo of him. It was him—there was no doubt about that.

“Well?” asked Miss Martinez.

“Are you sure this man actually lives here?”

“Of course,” she said, “I see him every day.”

“But that’s not possible!” Pete insisted helplessly.

Jupiter smiled at Miss Martinez and gently pulled the Second Investigator a little to one side. “It’s no use denying the obvious, Pete. There’s something fishy about the story, but we can assume that your grandpa really was here. We should therefore make an effort to find out more about the facts of the case.”

The First Investigator turned back to Miss Martinez. “What else can you tell us about Mr Peck?”

Miss Martinez raised an eyebrow suspiciously.

“Please,” Pete said. “I don’t know how I’m going to find him if I don’t find out how he ended up here in the first place.”

“What about your parents? I should be talking to them, not you.”

“They are travelling and have told me to take care of it,” Pete lied.

She didn’t seem convinced. “Then I’d like to at least, well, talk to them briefly on the phone.”

“You can’t!” said Pete a bit too quickly.

“Not now, anyway,” Jupiter added calmly. “They are in Europe. It’s night there already. You can contact them late tonight.”

“Then my shift is long over,” Miss Martinez said and sighed. “All right. Mr Peck moved in here three weeks ago, over in Block 1. It wasn’t exactly, well, easy with him from the start.”

Pete swallowed in trepidation. “Wasn’t exactly easy?”

“He was a charming old gentleman!” she remarked. “But pretty soon, he was, well, confused... Sometimes he’d walk around here asking me for directions to his apartment because he’d forgotten where it is. Once he even stood in front of me in his pyjamas and wanted to know why he was on an island. That’s why we decided after only ten days that it would be better for him to switch to assisted living.”

Pete’s eyes snapped open. “Excuse me? To assisted living?”

“Mr Peck had difficulty looking after himself... and he was a danger to himself and others. Once he accidentally set off the fire alarm because something caught fire while cooking. Well, in such cases, the home management has to act.”

Pete turned pale. “The way you tell it, it sounds like my grandfather is losing his senses! But it’s not like that. He’s just a bit peculiar.”

“Well,” Miss Martinez said uneasily. “Maybe you’d better talk to the director of the home, Dr Burke. He’s on rounds in Block 3 right now, but he should be done soon. He’ll come by here then and I’m sure he’ll have time for you.”

Pete became uncomfortable. “All right,” he muttered. “Thank you.”

“We’ll wait outside,” Jupiter suggested, pulling Pete along with him.

“Jupe, I don’t understand all this,” said the Second Investigator as they stood in front of the glass door in the sun.

Before Jupiter could answer, the door slid open again and the tall man in the blue overalls who had moved the plants came towards them. “So you’re looking for your grandpa,” he said without mincing words, looking at Pete out of uncomfortably small, piercing eyes. His skin was pale and blotchy. He rummaged a cigarette out of a packet in his shirt pocket and lit it.

“Er...” Pete said, pointing at the cigarette. “Is this even—” He got a puff of smoke and coughed.

"I didn't know Mr Peck had a grandson."

"He does," Pete replied. "Do you know my grandfather?"

"I am the caretaker here. I know all the people on this island."

"Is it really true that he was a bit... upset?" Pete asked.

"Look, I'm just a caretaker," the man repeated, blowing another cloud of smoke in Pete's face. "I don't know everything about everyone!" Then he walked so close to Pete that he almost bumped into him, and didn't dignify him with another glance.

"What was that about?" asked Pete indignantly. "What a weirdo!"

They looked at the caretaker, who had started to water the plants.

"A headstrong contemporary," Jupiter agreed, "and he keeps looking over at us."

"That bugs me," Pete said after a short while. "Come on, we'll wait inside." They went back inside the building and took a seat in a fancy waiting area with a huge window front.

Pete let his gaze wander over the people who, leaning on canes or walkers, shuffled along the wooden paths. One very tall, broad-shouldered man was there, muttering incessantly to himself. Pete's gaze darkened. His grandfather was not one of these people. He had always been in top shape, both physically and mentally. To Pete, it was completely absurd that his grandfather had lived here for the last few weeks!

The excited voice of an old woman who had just stepped next to the reception jolted Pete out of his thoughts. The white-haired lady was walking bent over on a stick, her face was wrinkled, but she radiated a certain determination.

"Mrs Pommeroy, it can't go on like this!" the old lady said to Miss Martinez. "You really have to do something about 'Death' now!"

Miss Martinez looked up and sighed resignedly, but then smiled at the lady. "Mrs Penny, how nice to see you so, well, energetic. By the way, my name is Martinez, not Pommeroy, remember? Mrs Pommeroy hasn't worked here for a few months."

"That's what you said last time, Mrs Pommeroy," Mrs Penny replied gruffly and stood up in front of the counter. "Besides, you're distracting from the subject. 'Death' is going around and you don't seem to care!"

"What do you think we should do, Mrs Penny?" asked Sandra Martinez calmly.

"Well, you work here, so you should figure that out!"

Quick, dynamic footsteps approached and a doctor in a white coat came out of a corridor.

"Dr Burkel!" cried Mrs Penny, hurrying towards the doctor as far as her crooked back would allow her. "I want to complain to you! About Mrs Pommeroy!"

"Of course, Mrs Penny," Dr Burke said kindly, "but first I must attend to the two young gentlemen here. I'll join you later..." He then turned to the receptionist and said: "Miss Martinez, would you bring the hygiene reports to my office? I'll need the current data when the commission comes tomorrow."

"Of course, Dr Burke."

Jupiter and Pete stood up and walked towards the man. Dr Burke wore large metal-rimmed glasses, had a narrow face and sticking out mottled grey hair that surrounded his head like a halo.

"I'm Dr Burke." His handshake was warm and strong. "Miss Martinez called me and reported that Mr Peck's relatives wanted to see me. Which one of you—"

"Me," said Pete. "Pete Crenshaw, and this is Jupiter Jones. I'm Grandpa's grandson... well... Mr Peck's grandson."

"Are your parents here?"

"No, they are travelling. They sent me here... about the matter."

"Do you know where your grandfather is at the moment?"

“No, unfortunately not. I didn’t even know he was living here. To be honest, I don’t understand all this, Dr Burke. I have been told that my grandfather have been unable to look after himself and that’s why he ended up in this ward... but that can’t be, he’s not uh... that old.”

Dr Burke nodded. “Have you noticed any change in your grandfather’s behaviour lately? Forgetfulness, for example?”

“Well... he keeps misplacing his mobile phone,” Pete said, “and then forgets that he even has one.”

“Is he often listless?”

“No, not really.”

“Or is he prone to aggressive behaviour?”

“Now and then,” Pete answered, and actually he meant ‘very often’. The news image of his grandfather holding a gun flashed before his inner eye. “It’s always been like that,” he heard himself say.

“Is that perhaps related to a certain tendency towards paranoia?”

Pete would have liked to shake his head, but that would not have been the truth. “Yes... in a way.”

Dr Burke sighed. “I admit that the course of the disease seems to be very rapid... but such cases do happen. Also, there are often early signs, but they are downplayed, especially by family members.”

The Second Investigator blinked in confusion. “Wait a minute, wait a minute! Are you saying this isn’t all a mistake? My grandpa is really... supposed to be sick?”

“I’m afraid the symptoms are clear, Pete. Your grandfather is suffering from dementia.”

5. Perpetrator or Victim?

The petrol station was not in Ventura itself, but a good distance outside the city on a little-used road leading into the mountains.

It had taken Bob a while to figure it out... but a phone call to his father had finally put him on the right track. Mr Andrews worked in the newspaper office of the *Los Angeles Times*. It had been easy for him to determine the exact location of the petrol station robbery from the police reports. Bob had not told his father the reason for his interest and luckily he had been too busy to follow up.

The petrol station was tiny with only just two petrol pumps under the shabby roof. The adjacent building, housing a shop and payment counter, was decades old and surrounded by prickly desert plants. The whole place looked as if it had fallen out of time, and it was a miracle that it still existed at all. Only every few minutes did a car pass by.

Bob filled up his yellow Beetle and then entered the building.

"Nice car," the petrol station attendant greeted him, a short roundish man with a thick moustache and a baseball cap pulled low on his face. "That will be twenty-four dollars."

Bob settled the amount and looked around. He had decided not to beat around the bush. "This is the petrol station that was robbed yesterday, isn't it?"

The man nodded sadly. "Yes, it is. Would have liked to shut down for a few days to recover from the shock, but I can't afford it. It's happened to me three times now in this job. Imagine, I've been robbed three times in 30 years—once every ten years!" He shook his head.

Bob took advantage of the man's chatty mood and asked: "What exactly happened? Was the perpetrator really an old man?"

"Oh, it was even crazier than what they said on the news! They said the guy came in and robbed me... Actually, it wasn't like that at all!"

Obviously still reeling from the events, the man came out from behind his counter, walked past Bob and to the door.

"The guy comes in..." he declared, acting out the scene. "Rummages around on the shelf with the snacks... goes to me at the counter and wants to pay. Suddenly someone else comes in—a younger man. The old man goes completely nuts. Out of a sudden, he pulls out a gun. He must have it hidden under his shirt. Points the gun at the younger man and shouts: 'Don't move!'"

"I was completely terrified and wondered what I should do. I have a baseball bat under the counter, but against a gun? The old man then points the gun at me. 'Don't move!' he yells, and backs away."

The petrol station attendant stumbled backwards through his little shop and bumped into a shelf, causing a few bags of popcorn to fall out, but he didn't even notice. "I'm thinking... forget the baseball bat, forget the police, just hand over the money. So very slowly, I open the cash register, take out the big notes and hand them to him. It's not much. I don't make a lot of money here."

"Somehow, he doesn't take the money at first. He's probably confused himself—anyway, he looks confused. I guess he didn't expect a witness to come in. Finally, he grabs the money

and stuffs it into his pockets. The other guy says something to him, but the old man doesn't listen. Then he pushes past the man and runs outside... jumps in his car and drives off." The man took a few deep breaths as if he himself was on the run. "Knees still shake now when I talk about it."

"That's quite an adventurous story," Bob agreed. "So he didn't want to rob the other man, did I understand that correctly?"

"Yeah, seems so. In fact, the old man had even forgotten that he wanted to rob me!" The petrol station attendant laughed briefly. "Can you imagine that? Probably a bit senile already."

Bob frowned. "That other man... what did he say to the old man?"

"Tried to calm him down, of course. He also saw that the old man was a bit upset. Probably thought he could stop him somehow... but it didn't work. The old man kept saying to him: 'Stay away from me', and: 'I'm warning you, don't come any closer!' Then he also called him by name."

"Wait a minute, by name?" Bob gasped. "He knew his name?"

"No, I don't think he knew him," the attendant said. "He just sort of called him. He must have made it up."

"By what name?"

The petrol station attendant shrugged his shoulders. "I don't remember. Anyway, after the old man left, I asked the other guy about it. He said that wasn't his name... Told me that his name was Robertson or something—something quite different, anyway."

"Anyway, I go back to the counter to call the police, of course. I sit down there for a while because my nerves are shot. Then this Robertson tells me that he wants to wait for the police by the road, so he goes outside... but then I see him get into his red Mercedes and drives away. He just takes off like that!"

"Eventually the police came, but Robertson didn't show up again... and he is an important witness! Alone, I had a hard time describing this to the police."

Bob pointed to a small gadget he had spotted on the ceiling above the counter on the right. "What about that camera?"

"Didn't have Robertson in the picture. He was half standing in the doorway the whole time."

"What about the red Mercedes? Aren't cars usually filmed at petrol stations? So that no one leaves without paying?"

"Yes, but not here. The outdoor camera has been broken for years. It's not worth repairing with so few customers. Well, it didn't matter anyway. That Robertson couldn't have told the cops any more than I did, but I think it's a bit strange that he just gone off like that!"

"Hmm..." Bob wondered, frowning. "It sounds to me like he was desperate to avoid the police questioning him about the whole thing, and if I'm honest, I'd interpret the whole case differently. It doesn't seem to me that the old man intended to rob you."

"Excuse me?"

"You said the old man didn't pull out the gun until Robertson came in."

"That could be a coincidence. He would have threatened me even if Robertson hadn't shown up."

"Are you sure about that? As I see it, if someone wants to rob a petrol station and a witness comes in, he wouldn't continue, would he? Pulling the gun at the exact moment a witness enters doesn't make any sense."

The petrol station attendant remained silent. He was silent for a conspicuously long time and seemed to replay the robbery in his mind's eye. Finally, he said: "You could really be

right. It didn't occur to me then."

He hurried back to the counter and worked on the laptop placed there. "The video from the security camera," he said. "Come on, take a look!" They were exactly the same footage that had already been broadcast on television.

"Look! The old man comes in," the petrol station attendant muttered. "Stands in front of the snack shelf... Doesn't look over at me once... Now he turns around and gets scared. Draws the gun! Points it first at Robertson and then at me... backs away..."

"He's not really pointing the gun at you," Bob corrected the man. "He just turns in your direction such that the gun is pointing at you rather accidentally... but there you are opening the cash register and taking out the money. Don't get me wrong, sir, but it doesn't look to me at all like he wanted your money. It looks to me like he's trying to defend himself against Robertson... and in the excitement, the gun is pointed at you. Did he tell you to empty the cash register?"

The petrol station attendant narrowed his eyes. "Come to think of it, I don't think so! You know, I gave him the money because that's what you do when you're threatened with a gun. It's happened to me twice. In this case, you could be absolutely right. Maybe he didn't want my money. Maybe he just wanted to get petrol and then—"

"—And then Robertson came and later, he went off so suddenly not to avoid the police, but—"

"—To go after the old man!" the attendant gasped. "Gosh! Could have really been like that! Boy, and you figured it out! Like a real detective!"

Bob smiled to himself and decided to leave the business card of The Three Investigators in his pocket this time. He had already found out what he wanted to know.

After Dr Burke's shocking revelation, Jupiter and Pete had followed the doctor into his office where he wanted to tell them details about his diagnosis. However, Dr Burke's voice for Pete was like the sound of the sea coming through the open window. Only now and then a few words cut sharply like a knife through the monotonous murmur—'degeneration of the brain'... 'possibly Alzheimer's'... 'not curable'... 'good medical care'... 'self-help groups for relatives'...

"I can see I'm overwhelming you with all the details," Dr Burke finally said. "Sorry, I should discuss all this with your parents. Anyway for now, it's important that Mr Peck comes back. Do you at least have any idea where he might be?"

Pete shook his head slowly. "I didn't even know until a few hours ago that he no longer lived at home."

"We'll find him!" Jupiter was convinced. "We have some experience in that."

Dr Burke raised his eyebrows. "—In finding Mr Peck?"

"In finding missing persons in general. We have a small but successful investigation agency."

Dr Burke nodded, then leaned over his desk and clasped his hands. "One more thing I must warn you—Mr Peck is prone to aggression and paranoia. We have found him to be... quite short-tempered at times."

"I can imagine that," Pete murmured.

"If you find him, he will probably be reluctant to return here. He had a reason for leaving... and probably that reason is some far-fetched conspiracy theory he's created himself—that he is being robbed here, that the food is poisoned, that all the staff here belong

to a cult—things like that. Delusions of persecution can be a symptom of dementia. However wild the stories he may tell you, don't let it get to you."

"We will keep this in mind," Jupiter promised and rose from his chair. "Thank you for enlightening us, Dr Burke." He held out his hand to the doctor. "We'll be in touch with you."

"All right. If there's any trouble, you can always call me." He handed them a business card, and then they said goodbye to each other.

"Dementia," Pete said after they had left the building and sat down on a bench. The view of the sea was fantastic. Pete looked at the glistening waves and felt the tears welling up inside him, but he fought them back.

"That explains the books by his bed. He realized there was something wrong with him and found out what that was. Then he moved in here secretly because he didn't want to tell my mother the truth. After that, he lost his mind, took off and robbed a petrol station. I still can't believe it. What's going to happen now? Grandpa will never be the same again. He might not even recognize me by the time we find him... if we find him!"

"Take it easy, Pete."

"Who is going to pay for this retirement home? Can you imagine how expensive this place is? With a private beach and everything? He doesn't have that much money! We'll probably have to take him in. Anyway, I have to call my parents right now."

Pete already had his mobile phone in his hand when Jupe said: "You'll only scare them."

"Jupe... I can't handle this all by myself! If we find Grandpa, what then? Should I bring him back here? Or take him home? That's for my parents to decide. I have to tell them everything right away. They don't even know what's going on yet!"

"Neither do we," Jupiter said.

"What do you mean?"

"This whole story is hair-raisingly illogical and more than puzzling," Jupe explained. "Nobody gets dementia overnight. It's a gradual process."

"We just didn't notice it," Pete said, "or didn't know what to notice. It is now apparent when Dr Burke asked me all those questions—"

"You were not even sure of the answers."

"Grandpa is prone to tantrums, you can't deny that."

"He has always been prone to fits of rage, but that has nothing to do with an illness," Jupiter countered.

"He is forgetful at times."

"—But not in an unusual setting."

"And what about his paranoia?" Pete continued. "He always thinks the whole world is against him."

"That has also always been the case and is part of his personality."

Pete frowned. "You're acting as if nothing is wrong."

"He robbed a petrol station. I wouldn't call that nothing..." Jupe said, "but it may not be what it looks like. In any case, I find it strange that someone would move into a retirement home without consulting his family first. Normally, such processes are preceded by longer phases of decision-making."

"Jupe, please!" said Pete, annoyed. "Speak clearly to me, I can't stand your ramblings."

Jupiter sighed. "If you want it clearly and distinctly, I only believe half the story. Too many things don't add up here. I would like to claim that in ninety-nine percent of all cases, the dementia patient concerned would first deny what is happening to him and then resist

moving into a retirement home. However, your grandfather not only moved here voluntarily, he didn't tell anyone about it—not even his neighbour Mr Castro, although he used him for his own purposes so that the secret wouldn't get out.”

Pete felt the ice-cold lump that had formed inside him during the last hour slowly begin to thaw. What Jupiter was saying sounded plausible. Tentatively, the Second Investigator asked: “You mean it might not be all as bad as it looks?”

“At least it's different than it looks... and I am sure of that. Something is going on here and we're going to find out what it is.”

“How?”

“By seeking out someone your grandfather knows and visits regularly here on Sunny Isle—his former neighbour Neill Hooper.”

6. Trust No One!

Jupiter remembered the bookmark they had found in Ben Peck's book on dementia. Written on it was: 'Neill: Block 3, 2-14'.

Jupe and Pete walked along the winding paths to Block 3. They entered the building just as the lady at the reception was leaving her post. She had not noticed the boys. Perhaps it was better that way, Jupiter thought.

They made their way to the stairwell and walked up to the second floor. On the way to Room 14, they wandered through long, deserted corridors that smelled of pungent cleaning products—just like that in a hospital. Compared to the other two blocks where residents were seen walking around, the nursing ward seemed to be deserted. It was eerily quiet, apart from the soles of their shoes squeaking on the linoleum floors.

Finally, they found the right door, knocked and entered. Mr Hooper was lying in a small, sparsely furnished room in a hospital bed. Pete remembered meeting the old man once at his grandfather's house.

The headboard was slightly tilted such that Mr Hooper was in a half-sitting, half-lying position. A small television hung on a rack on the wall. It was on, showing a cooking show, but the sound was turned down so low that only a faint whisper could be heard. The curtains were drawn, blocking out the sunlight, so the room was half lit by the flickering of the TV. Apart from a white, swivelling bedside table and a single chair, there was no other furniture.

Mr Hooper did not react when Jupiter and Pete entered. At first they thought he was sleeping and approached the bed quietly, but then they became aware that his eyes were slightly open.

Jupiter cleared his throat. "Good afternoon, Mr Hooper."

Again there was no reaction.

"Mr Hooper?" the Second Investigator tried a little louder. "I'm Pete Crenshaw, the grandson of Ben Peck. We've met before, remember?" He stepped directly into Hooper's field of vision now, but the old man simply looked right through him.

"Jupe!" whispered Pete, startled. "He's not responsive at all!"

Mr Hooper's chest rose and fell slowly, he blinked regularly and a thin thread of saliva ran from his half-open mouth onto an already wet spot on the collar of his pyjamas.

Pete pulled a tissue from the dispenser on the bedside table, wiped the saliva from the corner of the old man's mouth and dabbed the wet spot dry. He found it a bit disgusting, but didn't want to think about it any further. He threw the damp tissue into a bin in the corner and then washed his hands in a small sink on the wall. Then he returned to the bed and sat on the edge.

"Mr Hooper," he said quietly. "We are looking for my grandfather. He seems to be in trouble and has gone missing. I don't know if you can hear me, but if you know something and... and can tell us something somehow..."

Hooper's gaze flickered slightly and this time, he looked at Pete. "Pete..." he whispered barely audibly and his gaze cleared for a moment.

"Yes, Mr Hooper?" The Second Investigator leaned forward to understand him better.

Hooper's voice was low and raspy as he murmured in Pete's ear: "Be careful... trust no one... no one here!"

Startled, Pete looked at him. Hooper's eyes reflected alternating hope and despair. The Second Investigator held his breath.

Suddenly, the door was swung open and a nurse, who immediately reminded Jupiter of Aunt Mathilda, marched into the room. When she saw Jupiter and Pete, she gasped.

"What are you doing here?" She eyed the two boys suspiciously and called out loudly towards Hooper. "Are these your grandsons, Mr Hooper?" She walked over and checked on him, and her gaze darkened. "Why, he's exhausted. What have you done to him?"

"Nothing at all, nurse..." Jupiter glanced at her name tag. "Nurse Beatrice, we were just trying to talk to Mr Hooper."

"Mr Hooper?" she repeated. "Then you are not related to him at all?"

Jupiter shook his head.

"Non-relatives of care patients need a visit permit. Do you have it?"

"No," Jupiter confessed.

"Out you go then." She waved her hands gruffly. "Out, out, out!"

Jupe and Pete were far too flabbergasted to contradict.

"Well, there's no such thing!" hissed Pete indignantly after they out in the corridor, some distance away. "Since when do you need a permit to visit someone? I've never heard of that."

"It seems very strange to me too."

"Did you know what Mr Hooper said just before Nurse Beatrice came in?" Pete lowered his voice. "He said: 'Trust no one'."

The First Investigator frowned. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, Jupe, absolutely! You were too far away to hear it. He almost whispered it in my ear, but he said: 'Be careful... trust no one... no one here', for sure! What did he mean by that? There's something wrong here!"

The door to Room 14 opened and without hesitation, Jupiter pulled Pete into a side corridor where they hid at the entrance to the visitors' toilet. Not a second later, they saw Nurse Beatrice walk past along the main corridor.

Jupiter crept out from their hiding place and risked a look around the corner. He saw Nurse Beatrice in a room behind a large pane of glass.

"She's gone into the nurses' room," he murmured to Pete, who had stepped behind him in the meantime.

"Do you think we can go back to Mr Hooper?"

Jupiter shook his head. "She has the corridor in view."

The First Investigator watched Nurse Beatrice reach for the phone. As the door was open, they could hear what she was saying despite her lowered voice.

"This is Nurse Beatrice. You had asked me to let you know immediately if a visitor showed up at Mr Hooper's room. That is exactly what has just happened. There were two boys with him—a fat one and an athletic one... I don't know exactly, but I can't imagine they spoke to Mr Hooper. The poor man is rarely really awake anymore..." There was a pause as Nurse Beatrice listened on, before continuing: "All right, I'll keep an eye on his room. You can count on me!" She hung up.

Jupiter and Pete gave each other meaningful glances before retreating.

"We have a case," Jupiter said after they had sat down again on a bench outside, and a look of wild determination had entered his eyes.

"I'm not surprised," Pete remarked.

Jupe continued: "Now we know that there really is a secret behind these walls waiting to be uncovered by us, and that we must be careful. Mr Hooper's warning was more than clear."

Pete let his gaze wander. It suddenly seemed to him as if they were on an island full of spies—as if all the seemingly random caregivers and seniors walking around were actually secretly watching them.

An old man shuffled past them. He was very tall and broad-shouldered and had a slow, stooped gait. Pete had seen him before while waiting for Dr Burke earlier. The man was then talking to himself, and now, he was again muttering something.

"*My hour is almost come,*" the man muttered, "*when I to sulphurous and tormenting flames... must render up myself.*" Then he just walked on, taking no notice of Pete and Jupiter.

"*Hamlet,*" Jupiter said, looking after the old man.

"Excuse me?"

"That was a quote from *Hamlet*." The First Investigator waved it off. "Not that important. Much more important is the question of who Nurse Beatrice was talking to on the phone earlier. If only she had entered the room a minute later, I'm sure Mr Hooper would have said more. We should definitely find a way to talk to him again without anyone noticing."

Pete's mobile phone rang. "It's Bob!" he said, answering the call. He tapped on the speaker phone to let Jupiter listen in.

"Hi, Bob, what's up?"

"A few things! First of all, the good news—your grandpa most likely didn't rob the petrol station in Ventura." Bob reported what he had found out.

In the end, Pete was a little relieved. "So Grandpa only wanted to use the gun to defend himself against this Robertson? But why did he take the money then?"

"I don't know about that... but as for this Robertson, he probably ran away to avoid being questioned by the police, so I suspect he gave the attendant a false name."

"Is there a description of this Robertson?" the First Investigator interjected into the conversation.

"Not a good one. The man was tall, but since he was wearing a cap and sunglasses, the petrol station attendant couldn't even say anything about the colour of his hair or his approximate age. At least we know he drives a red Mercedes. By the way, what did you find out?"

Jupiter and Pete reported on their encounters.

"Good," Bob finally said. "I'm going to pay Harry Jacobson a visit now. I'll get back to you."

Pete had just hung up when he spotted Mrs Penny. The old lady they had seen at Miss Martinez's reception came purposefully towards them.

"What does she want now?" muttered Pete.

Mrs Penny sat down on the bench with the boys without being asked and said quietly: "I need to talk to you."

Jupiter listened up. "Really? About what?"

"About Ben Peck. You're his grandchildren, right? I overheard you talking to Dr Burke earlier."

"I'm his grandson," Pete said. "You know my grandpa?"

"He wasn't here long, but I noticed him right away. A snoop he was... and then he went missing—like so many others. I think it has something to do with 'Death'... but nobody believes me. Everyone thinks I've lost my marbles."

Jupiter raised his hands. "Excuse me, Mrs Penny, this is all happening a bit fast. You know something about Mr Peck's disappearance? Can you tell us about it from the beginning?"

Mrs Penny shook her head. "I don't know much. All I know is that this Peck has been snooping around. He's been questioning everyone and taking an interest in missing people... but when I told him it had to do with 'Death', he wouldn't believe me."

"With death?" asked Pete trepidatiously. "You... you mean that these missing people died?"

Mrs Penny shook her head vigorously. "No, no, not like that. People have only went missing, not died."

"But you just said—"

"I know what I said. 'Death' walks around Sunny Isle at night. I've seen him a few times... but no one believes me."

"You mean, 'Death' is a person?" Jupiter enquired.

Mrs Penny nodded. "But I'm the only one who sees him."

"I see," said Pete, although he understood nothing at all.

"You don't believe me either," Mrs Penny remarked correctly. "I'm the only one who sees him because everyone else is in their beds at that time. It's not because I'm crazy. I walk around at night when I can't sleep. Walking is good for me, Dr Burke says... for my joints."

"And you saw 'Death' in the process?" asked Juve.

"Four times already," Mrs Penny affirmed.

"What did he look like?"

Mrs Penny's eyes got big and she murmured: "Scary! His face is horrific! And he speaks in riddles."

"And he... takes people with him?"

"No, he doesn't take them. They just go missing. One day, they are no longer here. I don't know... maybe it has nothing to do with dying."

"What does the home management have to say about it?" Jupiter asked naïvely, although he was beginning to have doubts about what Mrs Penny was telling them.

"They are making excuses. Anyway, Peck is the last one to go missing."

"And before him?" asked Jupiter. "Who else went missing?"

"Oh dear," sighed Mrs Penny. "The names... the names... Maria... Maria Silvestri was her name, I think."

Jupiter remembered the bookmark again. "Do you perhaps mean Maria da Silva?"

"Yes! Yes, that's it, Maria da Silva, that's it!"

"By any chance, does the name James Swift ring a bell?"

"Yes, he's missing too!" exclaimed Mrs Penny.

"What about Martha Longingdale?"

"Yes! You know about that?"

Jupiter ventured a shot in the dark. "—And Mathilda Jones?"

"Yes, that's right, Mathilda Jones!" Mrs Penny was now quite excited. "Mr Peck was trying to uncover the disappearance of these people... and that has been his undoing!"

"Maybe," Jupiter answered evasively and looked at Pete from the side.

Mrs Penny apparently had very fine antennae. "You don't believe me," she said suddenly.

"Yes, we do!" Pete tried to assure her.

"No," she said angrily. "You don't believe me... but it's the truth. 'Death' is walking on Sunny Isle." She braced herself on her walking stick, got up from the bench, and looked at

Pete. "I hope you find your grandpa." With that, she walked away.

"Goodness gracious!" murmured Pete. "What's going on here anyway?"

"It's hard to say," Jupiter murmured. "I was tempted to believe her, but when she failed the 'Mathilda Jones' test... I don't know. We could go to Miss Martinez at reception and just ask her about Maria da Silva, James Swift and Martha Longingdale. Given Mr Hooper's warning, that might not be a good idea. We'd better try to find out about these three people from Headquarters. I don't want to wake any sleeping dogs."

Pete looked over Jupiter's shoulder to a green area where the caretaker was still busy watering the plants. "Some dogs are already wide awake," he said quietly, "because that guy is looking over at us all the time again."

"This island holds a dark secret, Pete... and until we know who we can trust here, we will stay under the radar."

7. Crash

As they drove back into Rocky Beach, Pete, at the wheel of his car, said: "I'd like to stop by and look for Grandpa before we go back to the salvage yard. Maybe he has contacted Mr Castro by now... or maybe he's back home. It's possible."

"All right, it's almost on the way," Jupiter said.

As they turned into the street where Bennington Peck lived, they saw Mr Castro sitting in his Hollywood swing on the porch in front of his house. He had dozed off, but when Pete and Jupe got out of the car and slammed the doors, he woke up.

"Ah," he said, pretending to have been wide awake the whole time. "Any news of Ben?"

Pete shook his head. "No, what about you?"

"No."

Pete slumped his shoulders in disappointment. "We went to see Mr Hooper at the retirement home. We didn't expect him to be in such a bad shape."

Mr Castro looked at him with concern. "Bad? Really?"

Pete nodded. "He's barely responsive."

"Excuse me?"

"He's barely responsive!" repeated Pete aloud.

"I heard you, I'm not deaf. I meant... that's not possible! He's in assisted living, how could he not be responsive!" Mr Castro rose from his Hollywood swing.

Jupiter frowned. "Actually, he is now in the nursing ward, not in assisted living. We were there after all, and he hardly reacted to us."

"In the nursing ward? Since when? He was quite lively a few weeks ago."

"Really? We weren't aware of that," Jupiter said and began to slowly pinch his lower lip.

"Why didn't Ben tell me?" Mr Castro said indignantly. "He visited Neill more often than I did... and he knows I would have been interested. 'How's Neill?' I've asked, and he has answered 'fine' every time."

Now Pete frowned. His grandfather was usually very straightforward about what was going on, so it was not at all like him to lie to someone. In fact, so many things did not fit together in this case... but the Second Investigator could not make sense of it.

"We will stay on the ball," said Pete, "but we don't want to bother you too much. We'll just go over to my grandpa's house now."

"To Ben's house?" asked Mr Castro. "Well, he didn't show up unexpectedly. I was sitting here all day, and I would have noticed."

"In deep sleep?" murmured Jupiter so quietly that Mr Castro could not possibly hear.

But surprisingly, he did hear it. "I must beg your pardon. At the most, I dozed a little!"

Jupiter cleared his throat sheepishly.

"Maybe someone left a message on the answering machine," Pete said. They wished Mr Castro a good day, then walked across the street to Ben Peck's house.

In the garden, Pete lifted the flower pot under which he had hidden the key... but it was no longer there! Pete looked at Jupiter questioningly.

The First Investigator put his index finger to his lips in warning and pointed to the back door. It was ajar. Pete had certainly locked it in the morning!

Pete's heartbeat accelerated. Had Grandpa returned without Mr Castro noticing? If then, why should he have gone in from the back door? And why would he need the spare key?

He could only think of one explanation—a burglar! But where was the burglar then? Long gone... or still in the house?

They crept to the door that was ajar. Pete cursed himself for rattling the flower pot so loudly. If the burglar was still there, he would have been alerted!

Quietly they entered the house and listened. Nothing moved. They listened again at the open sliding door to the kitchen before Jupiter risked a look around the corner. No one was here.

Finally, they had completed checking the ground floor and walked silently to the stairs. Jupiter gestured to the Second Investigator that he would wait at the foot of the stairs in case anyone tried to escape.

Pete nodded and quietly walked up. The stairs creaked under his feet, and that could not be avoided.

Nobody was in Grandpa's bedroom. Then he entered the bathroom. His eyes immediately fell on the milky shower curtain. A figure could be seen behind it! Pete summoned up all his courage, took two quick steps towards the shower and pulled the curtain aside with a jerk.

There was a dishevelled mop in a cleaning bucket in the shower cubicle. Pete breathed a sigh of relief and laughed quietly at himself. It was good that Jupiter was at the bottom of the stairs and hadn't noticed! His friend would have had a good laugh at him.

Suddenly, a blow struck his back so unexpected that he lost his breath! Pete fell forward, stumbled over the edge of the shower cubicle and looked for a foothold. He got hold of the shower curtain, but it tore from its fastening. Pete fell into the shower with the curtain, taking the mop and shower hose with him.

The guy who must have been hiding behind the door ran out of the bathroom. Pete turned around, and saw only shower curtain everywhere! Fidgeting violently, he tried to free himself. His right hand found a way out of the folds and held on to something. It was the shower fitting. The shower hose that was underneath him suddenly coiled like a snake and sprayed water in his face.

Pete cursed, but finally managed to pull the curtain off his head and turn off the water.

A muffled scream echoed through the house.

Jupiter!

The intruder must have overpowered him! He was probably already on his way out, but Pete had a decisive advantage—he knew a shortcut!

He tore open the bathroom window and climbed out onto the sloping roof. Two metres away from him was the gutter, and below was the garden. Pete crouched down and wanted to slowly make his way to the edge of the roof on heels and hands. But after the struggle with the shower hose, the soles of his shoes were wet and his feet slipped away.

Pete slid down the roof without stopping. He tried to stop his slide at the gutter, but the gutter gave way and Pete fell—onto the intruder, who at that very moment, fled through the back door into the garden.

The timing was almost perfect. Pete only caught hold of one of the fugitive's T-shirt sleeves before he slammed onto the grass. Although he had only fallen barely three metres, the impact went through his bones like a shock wave and took his breath away. With all his willpower, he tried to shake off the daze.

The intruder had also gone down and was just getting back up. Pete had to be faster! He had to... but he couldn't. Stars danced before his eyes.

Then Jupiter rushed over, pushed the intruder to the ground again and held him there. Now Pete could catch a glimpse of his face...

... On her face—at the freckled features of a young woman. She was about mid-twenties, had clear green eyes, a snub nose and curls held back by a colourful hair band.

“Pete! Are you all right?”

“Yes,” murmured the Second Investigator.

“Are you hurt?”

“Don’t think so.” Pete got to his feet without taking his eyes off the intruder.

“She just knocked me down at the stairs!” reported Jupiter indignantly, glaring angrily at the young woman. “This is where your escape ends, you can’t fight us both!” He loosened his grip and stood up.

Until now, she had seemed frightened. As she rose, a cold smile transformed her face when she said: “Don’t be too sure...” The gun in her hand had come out of nowhere. She pointed it at the two investigators.

8. Harry is Angry

It took Bob only three quarters of an hour to get from Ventura to Santa Barbara by car. He reached the suburban neighbourhood where Ben Peck's friend Harry Jacobson lived. It was late afternoon, but the summer heat still lay like a bell over the streets and most people were holed up in their houses. Only a few children were playing outside in a garden, running excitedly through the water fan of a lawn sprinkler.

After Bob rang the doorbell, excited dog barking sounded from inside. Shortly afterwards, footsteps approached and an elderly man opened the door. He had a neat haircut and was wearing a light blue shirt and black cloth trousers. He looked as if he had just left an office. Only the small, wildly panting pug at his side did not quite fit into the picture.

Sceptically, the man eyed Bob from top to bottom. "Yes?"

"Good afternoon, Mr Jacobson. My name is Bob Andrews. I'm sorry to bother you, I'm looking for Ben Peck. My friend Pete—"

"I don't know any Ben Peck," Mr Jacobson said, shutting the door in Bob's face.

For a moment, Bob just stood there with his mouth open. Then he knocked on the door and called out again: "Mr Jacobson? Mr Jacobson, listen, I know you know Mr Peck."

There was no reaction, only the dog continued to snarl and bark.

However, Bob did not give up and continued: "You were his neighbour for years, and played poker together. I've already been to Mr Castro's today. I'm a friend of Pete Crenshaw, who is Mr Peck's grandson... and Mr Castro advised me—"

The door was opened again and Harry Jacobson impatiently pulled Bob into the house. "For goodness' sake! Stop shouting around here!" he murmured and closed the door. "If the neighbours find out—"

Bob looked at him perplexed. "What?"

"Well, the thing with Ben Peck!"

"But I just wanted to ask—"

"All right, all right," Harry Jacobson murmured and led Bob, accompanied by his excitedly panting dog, into an immaculately clean and tidy living room. Piano music played softly from a crackling vinyl record. They sat down.

"I don't want people to associate me with that," Mr Jacobson continued, his voice still lowered. "I really can't afford that now. You're one of those investigator boys Ben is always talking about, aren't you? Good grief. What has he been up to?"

"Um... we'd like to know that ourselves," Bob said uncertainly.

"Excuse me?"

"We'd like to know that ourselves!" repeated Bob louder. "That's why I'm here. Mr Peck has gone missing without a trace. Even Mr Castro doesn't know where he is, but he tipped us off to ask you."

Jacobson's eyes widened. "You don't know?"

"I don't... that's why I'm here."

"Well, the thing about the—" He faltered and his gaze darkened. Suddenly he became angry. "For goodness' sake, Ben always manages to get someone into trouble, even those

who have nothing whatsoever to do with the matter! He does his thing regardless of the consequences!”

Harry Jacobson took a few deep breaths. A strand of hair had fallen into his face during his outburst of anger. He brushed it back and regained his composure. The panting pug jumped onto his lap and Jacobson stroked it absently.

“Mr Jacobson,” Bob said slowly. “We have a strong suspicion that Mr Peck is in trouble.”

Mr Jacobson put his index finger to his ear. “Where do you think he is?”

“I mean I think he’s in trouble!”

“Oh, I see! Yes, he certainly does!”

“But we don’t know exactly what it’s about. It would be a great help to us if you could tell me what you know.”

Jacobson eyed him thoughtfully for a while. “All right,” he finally said. “Perhaps you can find him and lead him back to the right path of virtue. Well, listen up then...”

“Yesterday, late in the afternoon, my doorbell suddenly rang up a storm. Ben was standing outside, completely distraught. Of course he didn’t tell me what was going on... no, he just wanted a drink. Then he babbled something about being in danger and getting too close to the wrong people and that I’d better never go to a retirement home. Of course, when I confronted him about what the whole circus was about, he just said it would be better for me not to know.”

Mr Jacobson took another deep breath, but this time it did nothing to reassure him. “What an arrogant idiot! He thinks I’m a scaredy-cat and a square—just because I iron my shirts and used to work for an insurance company. Where would he be now if the insurance company hadn’t paid him when he accidentally burnt down Mrs Milford’s gazebo because his stupid remote-controlled lawnmower caught fire? I stood up for him then, but I’m not game for it anymore.” He shook his head. “Then he said he was going to wait for nightfall at my place and then head off to a hotel. Nightfall! Yeah, is he a secret agent or what?”

Bob frowned. “I still haven’t really understood what this is all about.”

“He wanted to hide here! But he didn’t tell me from whom or why! To be honest, I was convinced all the time that he was just talking stupid or having one of his delusional attacks again... until I turned on the TV this morning. You won’t believe it, kid—what I saw on the local news!”

“Like Ben Peck robbing a petrol station?” Bob said.

Harry Jacobson’s eyes snapped open. “Then you do know!”

Bob nodded. “But I didn’t know you knew.”

“Yeah, can you believe that?” cried Harry Jacobson, the strand of hair falling back in his face and the dog started barking again. “Robbing a petrol station and hiding from the police at my place? He did not tell me anything about the petrol station, instead babbled something about retirement homes! He belongs in one of those homes, or even better—in a nut house! He’s gone completely insane!”

“Did you do anything?”

“Get anything? No, Ben didn’t give me anything.”

“I mean—did you do anything?” repeated Bob.

“Oh, you mean did I call the police?” Harry Jacobson heaved an abysmal sigh and hung his head. “No. I should have... but I didn’t. In a way we are... uh... sort of friends after all. Maybe there is some logical explanation for the whole mess. I immediately called our old friend Castro, hoping he would know something, but he’s so deaf now that he never hears his phone unless he’s sitting right next to it!”

Bob suppressed a smirk. “Mr Jacobson, I can reassure you on one point—I was at that petrol station earlier. It all seems to have happened a little differently than it came across on the news. Mr Peck didn’t assault anyone.”

Jacobson was relieved. “I really hope Ben knows what he is doing.”

“Did he tell you where he was going then?”

“I offered him to stay here, but he didn’t want to. ‘Too dangerous,’ he said, as if he were James Bond. He spoke of a small hotel nearby where he had always wanted to stay... but there are many hotels around, I have no idea which one he meant. If I had known then that he was really in trouble, of course I would never have let him go!”

Bob thought. “A hotel close by, you say? ... Somewhere he had always wanted to stay?” Then Bob had a flash of inspiration. He rose so suddenly that the pug began to bark again. “Mr Jacobson, forgive me, but I must leave at once. I think I have an idea where Ben Peck might be!”

“What? Really? Where?”

“A long story. I’d better get going right now, before he goes off again.”

Bob was already on his way to the front door when Mr Jacobson held him back. “Just a minute, son. There was something else Ben told me. It might be important.”

9. Uh-Oh!

“Don’t move!”

Jupiter and Pete had not thought of moving in view of the small gun pointed at them. The expression on the young woman’s face left no doubt that she was serious.

“Who are you?” asked Jupiter, trying not to let his fear show.

She pretended not to have heard his question. “I’m going to leave now, and you two don’t follow me. Understand?”

Jupiter and Pete nodded.

She seemed to think for a moment, then her eyes fell on the tool shed. She pointed to it with the barrel of the gun. “In there. Go!”

Jupiter and Pete let the stranger direct them to the shed.

“You won’t get far,” Jupiter claimed, but it was an empty threat. He expected that she would lock them up and there was nothing they could do about that. He only hoped that she would not think of their mobile phones, which they could use to get help.

Then his mobile phone rang. Jupiter groaned inwardly.

“Give it to me!” she commanded, holding out her hand demanding.

Jupiter handed his mobile phone to her.

The intruder glanced at the display. For half a second, she was distracted.

So suddenly that Jupiter hardly noticed, Pete whirled around and kicked the gun out of her hand with his right foot. The gun flew through the garden in a high arc.

The woman cried out in surprise. Pete overpowered her in a flash and twisted her arm behind her back.

“Jupe!” gasped the Second Investigator. “There’s a rope hanging from the wall in the shed! Quick!”

Jupiter tore open the door, discovered the rope and ran back to Pete with it. Together they tied up the intruder and forced her to her knees. When there was no more danger from her, Jupiter took a deep breath.

“Pete,” he said reproachfully, “that was very reckless.”

“—But necessary,” Pete replied with a grin.

“Indeed. Well done! And now for you...” The First Investigator turned to the intruder who scowled at him. “Who are you?”

She was grimly silent.

“All right. We’ll get your name somehow,” Jupiter said as he bent down for his mobile phone, which had fallen on the grass during the short fight. He looked at the display. “It was Bob. I’ll call him back, maybe it was important. Pete, see if she has any ID or a driver’s licence on her.”

Pete set to work.

“Hello Bob. Any news?”

“Indeed! I have an idea where Mr Peck might be.”

The mobile phone was set loud enough for Pete to hear.

“What?” the Second Investigator shouted excitedly, but Jupe told him to take care of the intruder.

“We’re a bit busy at the moment Bob, please be brief!”

“All right. Mr Peck went to see Harry Jacobson yesterday. He told him a lot of confusing stuff that Jacobson couldn’t make sense of, but in the end there were two clues. First, I have a hunch that Mr Peck may have stayed at the Spanish Gardens Inn in Santa Barbara. Remember that place? We had breakfast there with him years ago. I don’t know anything for sure yet, but I’ll go there right away.”

“Good work, Bob. What is the second clue?”

“Mr Peck has told Jacobson about a nurse at Sunny Isle whom he trusts. Mr Jacobson is supposed to go and see her in case something bad happens or Mr Peck goes missing without a trace. Her name is Ellyn Djawadi—‘Djawadi’ spelled starting with a ‘D-J’.”

“Uh, Jupe...” Pete spoke up.

The First Investigator waved it off. “Not now, Pete.”

“Now, Jupe.”

Pete came up to him, holding the driving licence he had fished out of the intruder’s pocket. He held the document under Jupiter’s nose.

The driving licence photo was unmistakably that of the young woman. The document was issued in the name of ‘Ellyn Djawadi’—‘Djawadi’ spelled starting with a ‘D-J’.

Jupiter stared at the name, then at the intruder. “Uh-oh!”

The Spanish Gardens Inn was located on the outskirts of Santa Barbara in a dreamlike flowering garden. It was one of the few buildings in the area remaining from colonial times. The walls of the mission-like building were whitewashed and now glowed in the light of the setting sun. Somewhere, a robin was singing its evening song.

Bob had been here before, together with Pete, Jupiter and Pete’s grandpa. A few years ago, The Three Investigators had accompanied Mr Peck on a trip across the United States. At their very first stop, they had breakfast in this hotel’s café. Bob remembered how pleased Mr Peck had been with the old building and how much he had regretted not being able to spend a night there.

To Harry Jacobson, Ben Peck had said he was going to a hotel where he had always wanted to stay. With any luck, this was the right place.

Bob parked his Beetle by the road and walked through the garden, where the café’s cast-iron tables and chairs stood in the shade of the brick wall. At the moment, only one table was occupied, where a young woman was drinking coffee. Through an open archway, he entered a small courtyard and from here, he continued into the main building where the reception was located.

A middle-aged man with a mottled grey moustache sat behind a counter and looked up from his newspaper. “What can I do for you?”

“Good afternoon, I am looking for one of your guests—Mr Bennington Peck.”

The man looked at him blankly. “There’s nobody by that name here.”

Bob tried not to let his disappointment show. “Are you sure? Maybe under the name Ben Peck?”

A shake of the head was the only response.

Bob thought about the possibility that Mr Peck had checked in under a false name. “He’s an elderly gentleman, but very wiry. He has grey hair and light blue eyes.”

The receptionist remained so expressionless that Bob wondered if he was even listening to him. “—And he has a... uh... quite quick-tempered nature sometimes. He can be very

direct, if you know what I mean.” Still no response. “He drives a Ford. He also snores quite loudly...”

Slowly, the man shook his head and squeezed out a ‘sorry’.

“Well,” said Bob. “I must have got it wrong then. Have a nice day!”

The man did not answer, but watched Bob expressionlessly as he left the building.

Bob was disappointed. He had been so sure that he would find Ben Peck in this hotel, but perhaps something had come up. Maybe the mysterious red Mercedes Mr Peck was hiding from had turned up and he had had to change his plans. There were a thousand different possibilities.

Bob stepped out of the courtyard through the gate into the small garden, turned around and looked thoughtfully at the windows behind which were the hotel rooms.

Footsteps approached from behind. With a quick glance over his shoulder, Bob noticed that the young woman who had been sitting in the garden was about to be joined by a man. Bob decided to listen to what the two were saying to each other.

“We can go now,” the man said. “Our night’s rest is saved. I’ve got earplugs.”

“Thank goodness! Another night wall-to-wall with that world champion lumberjack, I would have left. By the way, I ran into him in the corridor earlier. Do you know what he asked me in all seriousness? He asked me if I’d been woken up last night by that disturbance. Someone had been banging on his wall like crazy.”

The man laughed incredulously.

“I told him that it wasn’t us, but that I could imagine the reason. Maybe the disturber of the peace had been disturbed himself—for example by loud snoring.”

“What more did he say?”

“He literally said: ‘Oh, you think so? I can’t imagine that. I didn’t hear any snoring and I’m a light sleeper.’”

While the man laughed loudly, the young woman got up and together they went to the road. There they got into a convertible and sped away.

Bob was electrified... and he had an idea. He rummaged through his pocket and found an old shopping list. With it, he marched back to the reception.

The receptionist looked at him as indifferently as before.

“It’s me again,” Bob said. “There was a couple out in the garden just now. I think they stay here. The lady lost a note. I was going to go after them, but they drove off. Maybe it’s important.” Bob put the shopping list on the counter. “Could you give it back to her?”

The man nodded curtly, reached for the note and put it behind him in one of the compartments where room keys and messages for hotel guests were kept. Bob noted that the compartment was labelled ‘105’.

“You’re welcome,” Bob said exasperatedly. “Have a nice day to you too.”

Only when he was outside did he allow himself a satisfied smile. He couldn’t be sure that it was really Ben Peck the couple had been talking about... but if it was, then he occupied either Room 104 or 106.

10. Allies

“Once again, Ellyn, we are very sorry!”

“I hope I didn’t twist your arm too much.”

“We couldn’t have known that—”

“It’s okay,” Ellyn Djawadi interrupted the two investigators and waved them off with a smile.

They sat on Ben Peck’s terrace in the evening sun and drank lemonade that Pete had quickly fetched from the fridge.

“I’m so glad it was all just a big misunderstanding. If I had known that Ben had a grandson... well, I had to assume two teenage burglars.”

“We thought you were a burglar too,” Pete said, “a stone-cold one, by the way. I was really scared you were serious!” He looked at the gun lying on the table.

“I’ve been carrying this gas pistol since I was mugged a few years ago. That doesn’t mean I’ve ever used it. I almost fainted from fear earlier! I was just thinking all the time—don’t let on, don’t let on! If they believe you’re ice-cold, they won’t hurt you!”

“You succeeded in that,” Pete remarked.

“Almost. In the end, you overpowered me.”

Jupiter sighed with relief. “Now that that’s settled, what are you doing here, Ellyn? How did you get into Mr Peck’s house? And why?”

“I work as a nurse at Sunny Isle where Ben has been living. That’s where I first met him. However, he went missing without a trace yesterday, but I’m sure you already know that.”

“Yes,” Jupe affirmed, “but what were you doing here in his house?”

“Well, it’s about Ben,” Ellyn replied. “I was afraid something might have happened to him. The home management doesn’t do much in such cases because the residents are usually picked up disoriented by the police shortly after they go missing and brought back. However, Ben was so confused in the last few days that I was worried. I knew he still had a house in Rocky Beach. So I decided to come here after work and see if he might be here. I got the address from the administration.”

“How did you get into the house?” asked Jupiter.

“I rang the bell and knocked first, of course,” Ellyn said. “After no one answered, I wondered where Ben kept his spare key. I then found it under the flower pot over there. I really just wanted to see if he was here and not lying unconscious somewhere in the house. I was on the first floor when I heard someone. I went to the stairs, saw you from upstairs and thought you were burglars. So I hid in the bathroom.”

Pete sighed. “How good it is that the ever-awake Mr Castro has everything fully in view, isn’t it, Jupe?” He became serious again and turned to Ellyn and asked: “What’s going on with my grandfather? Tell us what you know, please.”

Ellyn shrugged her shoulders, somewhat perplexed. “He’s a lovable oddball. I liked him from day one, and he liked me too, I think... but I felt sorry for him. Sometimes old people’s mental faculties deteriorate in a very short time, and he seemed to be such a case. He had to be moved to assisted living so quickly.”

“Well,” Jupiter began, wondering how many details they should let Ellyn in on. “The thing is this—we both don’t really believe that Mr Peck’s mental faculties have really diminished.”

Ellyn nodded in understanding. “I understand that it is often difficult for the family to accept—”

“No,” Jupiter interrupted her calmly. “What I’m saying is that there is circumstantial evidence that Bennington Peck was at Sunny Isle for a completely different reason. He may be on to something. We suspect that he got into trouble and then made his escape.”

Ellyn frowned. “On to something? What do you mean?”

“We don’t know that for sure yet. We only have a few hints and guesses.”

“What hints and guesses?”

“Really nothing concrete, but do the names Maria da Silva, James Swift and Martha Longingdale mean anything to you?”

Ellyn nodded. “Interesting you should ask me that. Ben Peck also asked me about the three of them.”

“Really? What did he say?”

“It was a bit puzzling,” Ellyn said thoughtfully. “I was walking through the park with him. He had had a confused morning, but at that moment, he was suddenly very clear. He said: ‘If anything happens to me, Ellyn, or if I suddenly go missing without a trace, try to solve the mystery of Maria da Silva, James Swift and Martha Longingdale!’ When I asked him what he meant by that, he didn’t elaborate.”

“Do you know these three people?”

“Of course. They were all residents of Sunny Isle.”

“Were?”

“Yes, they don’t live there anymore.”

“Can you make any sense of what Mr Peck was getting at?”

Ellyn nodded. “There’s a slightly eccentric resident there who keeps talking about people going missing.”

“Mrs Penny?” asked Pete.

“You know her?”

“We met briefly.”

“Mrs Penny has been saying lately that she sees ‘Death’ walking around at night, and that people would then go missing,” Ellyn said.

“So have these people actually went missing?” asked Jupiter challengingly.

“Yes,” Ellyn said, “but they didn’t die... and they didn’t disappear into thin air either. They have merely moved to other care homes. That’s the whole secret. However, Mrs Penny believes—honestly, I don’t know what she believes—that they were taken by ‘Death’ itself, or that they were abducted by aliens. In any case, she has a very vivid imagination and likes to talk about it. So I assumed that Ben had been talking to Mrs Penny for too long and she had infected him with her conspiracy theories.”

Jupiter remembered that Mrs Penny had also thought Mathilda Jones was a missing person and nodded thoughtfully. “Where did they move to?”

“Oh, I don’t know exactly,” Ellyn confessed, “but I can check with the administration if you want. How did you come up with those three names?”

Jupiter shrugged his shoulders. “Mr Peck had noted them down. We don’t know why.”

“You said Ben was at Sunny Isle for a different reason. Do you think it has something to do with these three former residents?”

“Maybe,” Jupiter said.

“All he had to do was to check with the administration to find out that they had merely moved away.”

“He may not have trusted the administration,” Jupiter said, thinking of Mr Hooper’s warning.

Pete obviously had the same thought, because he asked: “Do you know Neill Hooper?”

“Of course. Ben and Mr Hooper are friends, aren’t they? I’m afraid Mr Hooper is very unwell. He’s been in the nursing ward for some time.”

“Is that actually normal?” Jupiter wanted to know. “That someone ends up in the nursing ward so suddenly, I mean.”

Ellyn Djawadi shrugged her shoulders. “What is normal? Courses of illness are not always the same. Sometimes it can happen very quickly. That’s just the way it is.”

“We went to see him,” Pete told her, “but then a nurse came in and shooed us away because we didn’t have permission to visit. Is that normal?”

“It’s a precautionary measure we’re forced to take, unfortunately,” Ellyn said, sighing. “It’s not just us, by the way. It’s the way that is done everywhere now.”

“Precautionary measure? But why?” Pete asked.

“Because there are shady characters who shamelessly exploit the defencelessness of confused people. For example, vacuum cleaner salesmen who pretend to be relatives to enter the home just to get old people to buy something they don’t need at all. Anyway, vacuum cleaners are not that ridiculous. Air travel or cars have also been sold—to bedridden residents! If they are still legally competent, that is, if their signature on a sales contract is valid before the law, they are in constant danger of being fleeced by scammers. This is all the more so at Sunny Isle, because we are a very posh retirement home and our residents have the financial means to stay there. Anyway, I believe all this has nothing to do with Ben,” Ellyn finally returned to the topic. “So what’s wrong with him? Why did he run away?”

“Honestly, I was hoping you could tell us,” Jupiter replied. “Mr Peck told a friend that he trusted you... that you should be sought out if something happens.”

Ellyn shook her head thoughtfully. “I’m afraid I can’t make any sense of it.”

“Hmm... Of course, the fact that he trusted you doesn’t mean he let you in on it,” Jupiter admitted his error in reasoning and sighed. “Darn it. I was so hoping you’d take our investigation a step further, but I guess that was wishful thinking.”

Ellyn couldn’t suppress a smirk. “Your investigation? It sounds like you’re with the police.”

“Not quite,” Jupiter replied and reached into his pocket, but by then Pete had the business card of The Three Investigators in his hand and handed it to Ellyn. It said:



“Are you serious?” asked Ellyn.

“Absolutely serious,” Jupiter replied. “We have already solved many cases, and we are convinced that we are dealing with a crime here as well. Something wrong is going on at

Sunny Isle. Ben Peck has got too close to a secret and is therefore in danger.”

Ellyn looked at Pete and Jupiter thoughtfully. “I don’t want to offend you guys, but I can’t imagine it. I don’t see what kind of crime it would be. Instead, I know how common it is in a retirement home for elderly people to go missing because they have forgotten that they live there... and how regularly they suddenly develop paranoia and smell treachery at every turn.”

Ellyn seemed to realize that her doubts were not well-received by the two boys and quickly backtracked. “If you really are right, of course I will help you. I have Ben’s best interests at heart. If there is anything I can do, please tell me.”

The First Investigator nodded. “We may soon have to take you up on your offer.”

“Do you already have a plan?” asked Ellyn.

“Indeed I have. We need to see Mr Hooper again. Our visit this afternoon was unfortunately interrupted. You could help us get to the island unseen.”

“Why unseen? Just go tomorrow during normal visiting hours and—”

“Unseen,” Jupiter insisted, “and as soon as possible.”

Ellyn smiled uncertainly. “All right, if you say so. I could try to get you past the visitor reception and into the residence tomorrow.”

Jupiter shook his head. “I was thinking of earlier.”

She raised an eyebrow questioningly. “When?”

“Tonight.”

11. It's All About Money!

"Ellyn wasn't thrilled," Pete remarked after they had said goodbye to the nurse a little later and made their way back to the salvage yard. "I guess she doesn't think much of our theories either."

"That means nothing," Jupe replied. "Your grandfather is on the trail of a secret. If Ellyn had known what secret right away, it wouldn't be a secret anymore."

"True again. Hopefully Bob really finds Grandpa in that hotel. Then he can clear everything up. I'm going there right away. Sure you don't want to come with me?"

Jupiter shook his head. "I want to find out if what Ellyn said about Maria da Silva and the other two is true before my appointment with her tonight."

"You mean she could be lying?" asked Pete, startled.

"No," Jupe replied, "but what she knows might not necessarily be correct."

"If Grandpa got those names from Mrs Penny and she is indeed eccentric—as what Ellyn said, then this trail is going nowhere."

"Not necessarily, Pete," Jupe said. "We found the names on the bookmark in one of the books your grandfather read... and it was at his house. He didn't know Mrs Penny then. So I'm going to do a little checking. We'll talk on the phone."

Pete dropped the First Investigator off at the salvage yard and drove on to Santa Barbara himself. By now it was early evening. Aunt Mathilda was closing the main gate.

"Jupe, you've been out all day!" she said.

"—And I will be all evening," her nephew announced. "We are in the middle of an investigation that cannot be delayed, so—"

"It's okay, it's okay." Aunt Mathilda waved it off. "Dinner will be in an hour. If your important investigations allow you a break, your uncle and I would be delighted to have your company."

Jupiter retreated to Headquarters and immediately started calling all the care homes around Oxnard, asking about Maria da Silva, James Swift and Martha Longingdale. James Swift was the first he found.

"Yes, he lives here," an unfriendly lady at the Thousand Oaks Care Centre reluctantly said, "but visiting hours are over for today... and you need a visitor's permit if you are not a relative."

"When can I speak to him?"

"Speak? Not anytime soon. Mr Swift is bedridden and he has never spoken since he came here... but you can still visit him, of course. Tomorrow from ten... with permission."

Before Jupiter could thank her for the information, the lady had already hung up.

A few phone calls later, Jupiter had also tracked down Martha Longingdale and Maria da Silva. They were staying in two other homes nearby. On enquiring, he learned that both were still responsive but were now so much in their own world that there was little point in talking to them.

The First Investigator sighed. Now he knew that Ellyn's information was correct, but he still had no idea why these three people had been important to Ben Peck. Jupiter's hopes now rested on Neill Hooper.

Jupiter left Headquarters and went over to the Jones family home—a two-storey house next to the salvage yard, separated from it by a gate. He had lived here with his uncle and aunt ever since his parents died in an accident many years ago when he was only a child.

At dinner, Jupe remained so silent that his aunt finally said: “Goodness, Jupe, I don’t know if these investigations you keep doing are good for you in the long run. You just ate Brussels sprouts, which you don’t even like, and you didn’t even notice.”

Jupiter screwed up his face and drank a sip of water.

“What is it this time?” Uncle Titus asked. “Ghosts? Bank robbers? Prehistoric monsters?”

“Dementia patients,” said Jupiter, “and retirement homes.”

“Uh-oh!”

“It can really make you think,” said Aunt Mathilda sympathetically. “I would never want to live in a retirement home. Just the idea—”

“Don’t worry, Mathilda.” Uncle Titus put his hand on hers. “I’ll look after you when you’re old”.

Aunt Mathilda laughed. “—Or the other way round!”

“—Or Jupe will look after us both,” Uncle Titus suggested. “The best thing is to move to one of those posh residences where each resident has a personal carer.”

“You’d have to sell a few thousand lampshades and record collections to be able to afford it, Titus Jones. If necessary, you could win the lottery. I certainly don’t want to go to a state-run retirement home—way too few staff, everyone is underpaid and overworked, and no one really cares about the residents. Terrible!”

Jupe frowned. “State-run retirement homes?”

“Yes—where they put you if you don’t have enough money for a privately-run one,” Aunt Mathilda explained. “They are funded with tax revenue, so logically, you won’t expect any luxury there.”

The First Investigator’s gaze brightened. “Money,” he murmured.

“Excuse me?”

“Money! Of course! In the end it’s always about money! I can’t believe I didn’t think of this!”

“Jupe, would you please stop that,” complained Aunt Mathilda. “Always these flashes of inspiration at the dining table. Can you wait later and annoy your friends with that?”

“I’ll do that right now,” Jupiter replied, rising abruptly from the table. “I just have to verify a theory quickly. Thanks for dinner!”

He no longer noticed the simultaneous shaking of his uncle’s and aunt’s heads. He left the house, ran back to the salvage yard and entered Headquarters. After a short time, he had found out what he wanted to know on the Internet—Martha, Maria and James had all been placed in state-run retirement homes after living luxuriously on Sunny Isle.

That meant that they had once been rich... and now they were no longer.

It was all about money!

“So?” Pete asked after he had joined Bob in the Beetle and closed the passenger door.

It had taken him much longer to get to Santa Barbara than expected because of the evening rush hour. It was almost eight and the stars were already in the sky. The white walls of the Spanish Gardens Inn were illuminated by hidden lights.

“Nothing’s happened yet,” Bob replied, casting a greedy glance at the paper bag in Pete’s hand. He had specially called the Second Investigator to bring him some hamburgers on the

way here. "I'm starving. What have you got there?"

Pete tossed the bag to Bob and he went at it like a wild dog. Meanwhile, Pete told Bob about his meeting with Ellyn and Jupiter's plan to visit Mr Hooper a second time that night with her help.

He had just finished his report when a car approached from behind. Bob glanced in the rear-view mirror. It was a police car and it slowed down suspiciously. Then the siren yelped briefly and the warning lights sent a flash of red and blue into the darkness. The car stopped behind the Beetle. A policeman got out, and appeared next to the driver's door a moment later and knocked on the window.

Bob cranked the window down and looked into a bearded and sullen face. "Good evening, officer," he said as politely as possible.

The icy beam of a flashlight blinded him. "May I ask what you are doing here?"

"We are... uh... waiting here..."

The man held out his hand demanding. "Documents..."

"Excuse me?"

"Your driver's licence and vehicle registration... or you don't have a licence yet, huh?"

"Y-yes, I do," Bob replied, digging everything out.

The policeman looked at the documents for a very long time. The fact that he found nothing to object to obviously did not please him. "Go away from here now!"

"Excuse me? But why?" Pete objected. "We're just waiting here. This is a free country and—"

"Someone from the hotel has complained. The guests feel harassed, and if you don't leave immediately, I'll take you to the police station."

Pete laughed indignantly. "That's just—"

"—Not the way we want to spend our night," Bob interrupted the Second Investigator and hastily started the engine. "We're going to go home, Officer. Have a nice evening."

The policeman grumbled something unintelligible as Bob hurried to start his car and drive off.

"What are you doing?" asked Pete angrily.

"Didn't you notice that he was looking for trouble? He would never have left us waiting there!"

"But we are allowed to wait there!"

"Anyway, that didn't interest him!"

"We have to monitor the hotel after all!"

"Calm down, Pete, we can still do that. We'll drive around the block twice now, and then we'll park the car a bit further away, walk back and find a spot where we're guaranteed not to be seen from the hotel."

Shortly afterwards, the Beetle was out of sight in a side street and Bob and Pete were crouching at a cemetery wall under a chestnut tree, about a hundred metres from the hotel, but with a very good view of the building and the illuminated windows. If the police car came back, they could hide behind the wall in a flash.

The interruption by the police cost them ten minutes for which they had not been able to keep an eye on the Spanish Gardens Inn. This would have been enough for the driver of the red Mercedes to approach the hotel unseen, park the car behind a tree and enter the hotel.

On Sunny Isle, almost all the lights had already been extinguished. It was only ten o'clock, but seen from the mainland, the island already lay dark in the black water, lapped by silver

foaming waves. Only the winding wooden paths and a few windows were dimly lit.

Jupiter had come here in Uncle Titus's pick-up truck. Now he was standing on the coast road waiting for Ellyn's car to roll into the car park. The nurse got out and came up to him. She looked worried.

"I'll be honest with you, Jupiter, I don't feel good about this. If I'm caught giving an unauthorized person access to the residence at night, it could cost me my job... more so just before the day of the commission inspection, when everyone is always particularly nervous..."

"Commission?" asked Jupiter.

"We have regular visits from a commission of the health department. They check the hygienic conditions, medical care, safety and so on. Tomorrow morning at ten, it's that time again. The accounts department is probably still busy preparing the files for inspection. The fact that I'm sneaking around here with you the night before, of all nights, doesn't look good at all."

"No one will see us," Jupiter tried to console her. At the same time, his guilty conscience was calling—if they were seen after all and Ellyn got into trouble for it...

"By the way, I have since found out that Mrs Longingdale, Mrs da Silva and Mr Swift have all been moved to state-run facilities. This is despite the fact that they were previously wealthy enough to afford Sunny Isle."

Ellyn looked at him questioningly. "Well?"

"Don't you think that's unusual?"

"No, Jupiter. If a resident runs out of money, it is not possible to remain here. The home's management unfortunately has to place them somewhere else."

"Yes, but there must be more to it than that, or Mr Peck wouldn't have written down those three names."

Ellyn sighed. "Ben may have suspected more, but transferring a resident to a state-run facility is a perfectly normal procedure."

Jupiter felt doubts about his own theory rising in him, and he didn't like it at all. "Let's hear what Mr Hooper has to say about it," he suggested and looked back to the island. "How do we get across?"

"With my car. There is a small car park for employees on the island. However, the security booth at the barrier is manned at night, so you'll have to hide in the footwell of the back seat."

The plan worked. Huddled behind the passenger seat, Jupiter heard Ellyn speak briefly to the security guard and then drive on. When the car stopped, they were in a small, somewhat out-of-the-way car park. From there, Ellyn led the First Investigator along narrow paths and stairs to a closed steel door at the back of a large building.

"Isn't this Block 2?" asked Jupiter.

"Yes, but there is a corridor connecting Blocks 2 and 3. We'll take that. It is the delivery entrance for the kitchen. I'll go in the front, tell Carol at reception that I forgot something in the lounge, and then open up this door for you to go in."

Jupiter nodded. "All right."

"In three minutes," Ellyn promised and left.

Jupiter listened to the sound of the sea while he waited. Then the steel door opened from the inside. Ellyn waved him in and Jupiter found himself in a dark, white-tiled canteen kitchen.

"Won't Carol at reception be surprised if you don't come back?"

Ellyn shook her head. "I told her I was going out the back."

“Is there actually a night nurse here who could get in the way?”

“Of course—several... but they’re usually in the nurses’ room when they’re not being called out by the residents.”

“What is the danger of us running into someone on the way to see Mr Hooper?”

“It’s hard to say. Sometimes it’s quiet all night, sometimes it’s constant alarm. You never know.”

Just beyond the kitchen was the dining room—large, dark and deserted. Then they entered a series of corridors, dimly lit by greenish night lights. Jupiter’s footsteps squeaked terribly loudly on the linoleum floor.

Ellyn led him through a labyrinth of corridors until they reached one that led to Block 3. Through a dimly lit stairwell they went to the second floor and finally stood in front of Mr Hooper’s room door.

“So far, so good,” Jupe whispered and quietly pushed down the handle. One after the other, they entered the room.

It was dark, but Jupiter could hear Mr Hooper’s steady breathing. The First Investigator approached the bed where a little moonlight fell through the window onto the ceiling.

“Mr Hooper,” he whispered. “Mr Hooper, can you hear me? Wake up!”

But the old man was fast asleep. When Jupiter touched him on the shoulder, not even his eyelids twitched.

“Do you have any idea how we can get him awake?”

Ellyn shook her head. “I was afraid that might happen. You know Mr Hooper rarely has waking moments anymore and—”

Suddenly, a soft electronic beeping sounded and the TV on the wall flared up. The screen came to life as if someone had switched it on with a remote control.

Jupiter frowned irritably. Was it a malfunction? The First Investigator was expecting a normal television channel, but instead he saw the grainy image of a dark room. The picture quality was like that from a simple video camera. Suddenly, a horrible grimace slid into view from the right.

A pale skull stared into the camera. The eyes were so deep in their sockets that they were invisible except for a red glow, as if reflecting the embers of a lighted cigarette.

Then a voice sounded. Muffled and murmuring, almost as if the skull was talking to itself, it said: “Let’s see if you can see me. Well, do you see me? Can you hear me? Ah, there you are! I see you and you see me. Very good, very good, very good...”

12. Jupiter Goes After the Skull

Jupiter stared at the screen with the skull, the skull stared back. “What is this?” he exclaimed.

“Look!” Ellyn pointed to the window.

Jupiter looked out through the window to the sea, but he could also see some of the other wings of the building. Behind each pane of glass, grey-blue light flickered, as if the TVs had been switched on in all the rooms and was showing the same picture.

“Jupiter, what’s going on?” asked Ellyn anxiously.

“I don’t know,” Jupe said, “but this is not a normal television broadcast. Someone is feeding in the image from a video camera! Ellyn, where are the commercial videos and the weather news being transmitted to the TVs from?”

Ellyn Djawadi looked at Jupiter in irritation. “Excuse me?”

“Where is all the video equipment controlled? Quick, I want to catch the guy in the skull mask!”

Ellyn pointed in a vague direction. “In Block 2—ground floor, at the end of the main corridor.”

“Take me there!” Jupiter said and was already at the door. “Hurry up!”

Finally, Ellyn got moving and took the lead. As they ran down the corridor, more and more red lamps flashed above the room doors.

“The residents have woken up and are ringing for the night nurse!” Ellyn explained frantically.

“We can’t let them catch us!”

“This way then!” said Ellyn, pulling him into a stairwell.

Jupiter lost his bearings for a few moments before he found himself back in the corridor that connected Blocks 2 and 3. The skull could be seen on all the TV screens they passed.

“That’s the main corridor up ahead!” gasped Ellyn. “Around the corner to the left there and then the last door at the very end!”

Jupiter nodded and overtook her. As he turned the corner, he got a huge fright, because suddenly a white, wrinkled figure with flowing hair was standing in front of him.

It was Mrs Penny in a nightgown. She was also so frightened that she gasped for air for seconds before letting out a scream.

At that moment, the skull on the screen above them flinched, a hand reached towards the camera and the image went out.

The figure in the mask had heard the scream and interrupted the transmission! That meant he had to be close by!

“No need to panic, Mrs Penny, it’s all right,” Jupe hurried to say. “Here comes Miss Djawadi, she can explain everything to you.”

“But—” Mrs Penny started to say, but by then the First Investigator had already moved on. He ran down the main corridor, his eyes on the last door the whole time. The culprit had to be there!

Breathlessly, he reached the end of the corridor. The last door said ‘Control Centre’.

Jupiter didn’t hesitate for a second and pushed down the handle. The door was unlocked and swung open inwards. The room behind it was not particularly large. It was dark except

for a row of shining and flashing lights.

Jupiter groped for a light switch, found it, and after the fluorescent lights on the ceiling flickered on, he saw that no one was here. Several control panels and computers stood on simple office desks. Building services such as water supply, heating, security, and technology could be controlled from here, even the transmission of the television programmes, as the First Investigator realized with a quick glance.

But there was still no one here.

A scream made Jupiter spin around. He hurried back into the corridor. At the end of it he saw Ellyn and Mrs Penny waving excitedly. He ran to them.

"There was someone there!" exclaimed Ellyn. "I didn't recognize him, it was too dark, but he came out of the cafeteria up ahead." She pointed to an open door not far away. "When he saw us, he took off."

Mrs Penny nodded frantically.

"Which way?" Jupe asked.

The two women pointed to a glass door that led outside. Jupiter peered out and saw a fleeing shadow between the rocks. The First Investigator pushed open the door and ran after the stranger!

The stranger ran down to the beach. He had a considerable lead, but fortunately he was not very fast. Although Jupiter was truly not the best runner, he slowly narrowed the gap.

Arriving at the cove, he had nevertheless lost sight of the fugitive. Panting, the First Investigator stopped. Suddenly, an outboard motor roared, a shadow emerged from the darkness and glided out to sea. A few moments later, the small motorboat turned away and disappeared from sight. Slowly, the sound of the engine died away.

Annoyed and frustrated, Jupiter ran to the place where the boat had apparently been moored. His gaze fell on something lying on the sand—something that shimmered white in the moonlight. It was a black, knitted stocking mask with a white skull printed on it. If pulled over the head, it would look like a skull. Now, lying on the ground, it looked to Jupiter as if the face of 'Death' was laughing at him.

When the First Investigator returned to the building, he heard footsteps and voices everywhere. The appearance of the skull on the TV had apparently woken up half the building. Fortunately, there were no rooms here in the main corridor as it merely connected the individual wings of the building. Therefore there was no one to be seen apart from Ellyn and Mrs Penny, who were now coming towards him.

"I knew it!" the old lady burst out at the First Investigator. "So you now realize that there are strange things happening on this island, otherwise you wouldn't be here in the middle of the night. This afternoon you said you didn't believe me!"

"You claimed that, Mrs Penny, not me," Jupiter corrected her. "In any case, I believe you now."

"Did you get him?" asked Ellyn.

"No," Jupiter confessed, "but I found this." He showed her the skull mask. "See... it's just a mask, Mrs Penny, not the walking dead."

Mrs Penny frowned. "That wasn't 'Death'!"

Jupiter did not understand. "What do you mean?"

"I said that wasn't 'Death'," Mrs Penny repeated. "That skull on the TV has nothing to do with the figure that walks around here at night."

"No?"

Mrs Penny shook her head. "I've never seen that mask before."

“But... but I thought...” Jupiter looked questioningly at Ellyn, but she too just shrugged. “What does this other figure look like?”

“Big,” replied Mrs Penny, “and white—like a ghost... with a horrible face, about—” She fell silent. Her gaze passed Jupiter and fixed on something behind him. Mrs Penny’s eyes widened. “Like that!” she breathed, pointing down the corridor.

Jupiter turned around.

At the end of the corridor stood a brightly dressed figure, tall and broad-shouldered and swaying slightly back and forth. The face was white and grotesquely distorted, the mouth gaping wide in a silent scream, the nose and eyes just ugly frayed holes. The sight was eerie. Jupiter felt goose bumps all over his body.

The figure swayed like a zombie as it moved forward with shuffling steps.

“What is it?” whispered Ellyn in horror.

“‘Death’,” said Mrs Penny.

Determined, the First Investigator straightened his shoulders and walked towards the figure, who didn’t seem to have noticed him yet. Only when Jupiter was a few metres away did the figure stop and turn its disfigured face towards him. Jupiter realized that this too was a mask. It was made of a white, putty-like material that was free to mould. He had seen such masks before in the theatre. From a distance, they looked gruesome, but up close they were nothing more than that—plasticine masks!

The figure—given his height and stature, it could only be a man—was wearing white pyjamas and muttered incessantly to himself. He did not seem to be bothered by Jupiter’s presence.

“I am thy father’s spirit,” came the muffled voice from under the mask. *“Doom’d for a certain term to walk the night...”*

The words sounded very familiar to Jupiter—as did the height of at least two metres and the swaying gait.

The First Investigator was suddenly quite sure who was behind the mask.

13. Failed Across the Board

If it hadn't started to get chilly, Pete would probably have fallen asleep at the wall.

It was almost eleven o'clock. At regular intervals, he and Bob had walked to the hotel to see if anything suspicious was happening. With each approaching car, they looked up eagerly, but again and again they were disappointed. The couple Bob had overheard in the afternoon had returned. Nothing more had happened.

"How long are we actually going to keep this up?" asked Bob, yawning.

"As long as it takes. If Grandpa really lives here, he has to come back sometime."

"Maybe they were talking about a completely different snorer," Bob mused. "I'm not so sure now."

"You can go home if you want. I'll stay here as long as necessary. My parents aren't home anyway."

"—And mine think I'm staying at your place."

"—And my place is here, for the moment," Pete said.

Again, the headlights of an approaching car felt their way through the night, but Bob and Pete hardly looked—until the car slowed down and eventually rolled into a car park space. They only recognized the car model when the blinding headlights were switched off. Then the door opened, a man got out and walked hurriedly towards the hotel entrance.

"Grandpa!" Pete gasped and came off the wall. He ran, but their hiding place was so far from the entrance that the man he thought he recognized as his grandfather had already gone into the building by the time Pete reached the gate.

The Second Investigator sprinted across the courtyard and into the main building. He looked around eagerly. Grandpa was nowhere to be seen. The rooms numbered in the 100s had to be on the first floor. Pete was already halfway to the staircase when the man at the reception whistled him back.

"Wait, wait, wait, young friend, don't be in such a hurry!"

At that moment, Bob ran in, panting.

"Hey! You're the boy who was here a few hours ago!" the receptionist burst out angrily when he turned and saw Bob.

"That's right, and you lied to me," Bob replied. "The man I asked about has just came back."

"That's my grandpa," Pete explained, heading for the stairs again. "I have to see him!"

"Stop!" the receptionist shouted angrily. "As long as you are not hotel guests, you are not allowed to enter—"

That was as far as he got. Above their heads there was a rumble and a clatter.

Everyone looked up at the ceiling.

Someone shouted... then footsteps pounded.

Pete didn't care now if the receptionist objected. In one leap he was at the stairs and ran up. What room number had Bob found out? 104 or 106! So to the right!

Pete reached Room 104 and rattled the knob, but it was locked. As he hurried to 106, the door of Room 105 flew open and an outraged man in pyjamas stormed into the corridor. He was fumbling to get the plugs out of his ears. "What do we have to do—"

At that very moment, the Second Investigator ran straight into him.
Gasping, the man went down. Pete stumbled and hit the floor as well.

"Help!" the man shouted. "Robbery!"

"Nonsense!" Pete snapped at him, got himself up and yanked open the door of Room 106.

There was nobody there but a chair and a small desk had fallen over... and the window was open.

Pete ran to the window and looked out into the darkness. There! Two men were running through the courtyard—one chasing the other!

"Grandpa!" shouted Pete, who now clearly recognized his grandfather, but by then, the two were already at the road.

Pete saw that a trellis of plants was attached to the wall, which had made it very easy for the two men to climb down. He was already halfway out the window to give chase when he was suddenly grabbed from behind and yanked around. The man with the earplugs stood in front of him, snorting with rage.

"Not so fast, you rascal!"

"Let go of me, there's been a misunderstanding!"

"You can tell that to the police, who I'm about to call!"

"You can call whoever you want, but now let go of me!" Pete snarled back.

Now Bob and the receptionist also stormed into the room. They were all talking at once, trying to drown each other out. Then engines howled outside and two cars shot down the street with screeching tyres.

Pete recognized his grandfather's old Ford and a red Mercedes before they both disappeared around the corner. He angrily banged his clenched fist against the wall, but it was no use. Grandpa was gone, fleeing from his pursuer. Their mission had failed.

Pete and Bob were dead tired when they finally arrived in Rocky Beach shortly after 1 am. Jupiter was already waiting for them in front of the Crenshaw family home.

"There you are at last," grumbled the First Investigator.

"Santa Barbara is not just around the corner," Pete said as he unlocked the front door.

"We should have met at Headquarters," Jupiter grumbled on.

"It's not always that I get to be home alone, so we have to take advantage of it," Pete countered and led his friends into the living room—the living room where the whole mess had started only yesterday morning. It seemed to Pete as if weeks had passed since then.

He and Bob reported to the First Investigator what had happened in Santa Barbara.

"It took us ages to convince that stupid receptionist and the hotel guest that we weren't vicious criminals," Pete said, annoyed.

"When he finally believed us, the receptionist then admitted that he had been given money by Mr Peck to pretend he had never seen him before," Bob added.

"Besides," Pete continued, "it turned out that it wasn't the hotel that sent the police after us as the receptionist didn't know anything. It was probably the man in the red Mercedes who called the police to chase us away from the hotel so he could go in unseen and ambush Grandpa. It worked, and now he's after Grandpa, probably have already caught him, and we can do absolutely nothing!" He clenched his fists angrily.

Now Jupe told about his encounters on Sunny Isle, from the skull apparition on TV to the giant in the white pyjamas.

“The man’s stature was immediately familiar to me. When he quoted from *Hamlet*, it was clear to me who was hiding behind the plasticine mask.”

Bob frowned. “Quoted from *Hamlet*?”

“Pete and I came across a resident twice this afternoon who was walking around muttering something under his breath—quotes from Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet*. He seems to do that at night as well, wearing his old theatre mask.

“Ellyn said that Mr Turner used to be a member of The Shakespeare Company. He was an actor on stage for decades. Today he can’t remember what he ate for breakfast, but he remembers his lines very well. So he wanders through the retirement home at night and brings the ghost of Hamlet’s father to life. No one noticed, except Mrs Penny, who regularly encountered him on her nightly excursions... but of course nobody believed her.”

“What does that have to do with the guy in the skull mask?”

“I have absolutely no idea,” Jupe confessed. “He got away from me, and I couldn’t go back to Neill Hooper’s room after that. The corridors were swarming with staff and frightened residents. Ellyn and I would have been spotted.”

“We failed across the board,” Pete sighed dejectedly. “We found out exactly nothing. We couldn’t even protect Grandpa! I’d love to call my parents and tell them everything but that’s no use either.”

Frustrated, the Second Investigator opened a bag of chips. He mechanically stuffed the chips into his mouth until Jupiter snatched the packet out of his hand and began to gobble away.

“Are we going to talk about the case or eat chips?” asked Bob.

“Eat chips,” Jupiter smacked. “My brain needs energy, otherwise I can’t think.”

“You’re going to gain weight eating those,” Bob countered.

“My brain couldn’t care less.”

“Come on, guys,” Pete said. “We need a plan now. We have to somehow—”

The Second Investigator fell silent. His gaze had fallen through the window into the garden. Something had moved there! There was someone outside!

“Pete, what is it?” Bob asked.

“Keep talking quietly,” he murmured, averting his eyes from the window.

“Huh? What?” Bob wondered.

“Just keep talking inconspicuously,” Pete whispered. “I just saw someone through the window. Don’t look! He’ll notice! You guys keep your heads down and I’ll pretend to go to the bathroom. Then I’ll sneak out the back and into the garden.”

“Good plan, Pete!” said Jupiter, seemingly calmly reaching into the chip bag again.

Pete rose as naturally as possible and left the room. In the hallway, he scurried to the back door, opened it a crack and pushed his way outside. Silently, he circled the house until he stood at the corner to the garden. There was no one to be seen, but it was also really dark.

Pete decided to look in the garden shed. He crept up and peeped through the window, but there was no one inside either.

Suddenly a warm hand came from behind and covered Pete’s mouth. He wanted to scream, but Ben Peck whispered in his ear: “Quiet, Pete or I won’t give you birthday money next year!”

14. Grandpa is Back!

For a moment, Pete was so perplexed that he was barely able to catch his breath.

“Grandpa!” he finally groaned and fell around his grandfather’s neck. “Grandpa, I’m so glad! Are you all right? What have you done!”

“Really!” retorted Ben Peck, half indignant, half touched. “Is that the way to greet your own grandfather? Besides, you’re the one who did something wrong. What in three devils’ names were you doing in my hotel in the middle of the night?”

“You saw me?”

“No, but I heard when you called after me. That’s why I’m here! What were you doing there? How did you even know where I was? Are you spying on me?”

“Am I spying on you? Of course I’m spying on you! Do you actually have any idea what’s been going on here?” Pete looked at his grandfather in the pale moonlight. He looked the same as always—fit, determined, with alert blue eyes, and not a bit frail—at most a little worried.

“What’s been going on here? What do you mean?”

Pete took a deep breath, but then decided that the night garden was not the best place for revelations. “I’ll tell you all about it in a minute. I’m so glad you’re here!”

“All right, all right.” Ben Peck seemed slightly embarrassed.

“Let’s go inside,” Pete suggested. “Bob and Jupe are there too.”

The two were astonished when Pete returned to the house with his grandpa.

“Mr Peck!” Jupiter exclaimed. “What are you doing here?”

“First, turn off the lights,” said Ben Peck, going to the light switch and enveloping the living room in darkness.

“Mr Peck, what—”

“Better safe than sorry,” murmured Mr Peck. “I’m being followed.”

“... By the driver of the red Mercedes,” Jupiter said. “Yes, we know that. What we don’t know is who the man is? And what kind of story did you get yourself into? We tried to solve the mystery, but it only got more and more confusing. It’s about the missing people, isn’t it? About James Swift and the others, who are now living in state-run homes; and money; and your old friend Neill Hooper. We suspect that it has to do with the man in the skull mask, but how is it all connected? What’s the secret, Mr Peck?”

“I’d tell you if you’d just stop talking!” Ben Peck dropped into a vacant chair. “Really, I’m really impressed with what you’ve found out. Well, where do I start...”

“Wait!” Pete said, leaning forward in the darkness, so that he was looking his grandfather straight in the face. “Before you say anything, Grandpa, I want to know one thing—are you really all right? How is your... uh... health?”

“Good grief, Pete, you’re beginning to sound like Castro: ‘How’s your blood pressure? And your heart?’ I’m doing great, except for the fact that I’m on the run... but that also keeps me young in a way.”

“At the retirement home, they said you were... well—”

“—A confused old fool? Geez, Pete, I was just playing that for them so that I would be transferred to the other ward! I couldn’t find out anything from all those lazy geezers lying on

the beach.”

Pete sighed with relief. “I’m glad about that. All those stories really scared me—with the apartment on fire and all.”

“That, on the other hand, was not an act,” Ben Peck admitted candidly. “I burnt an oven mitt. They have those stupid electric stoves where you never know if it is hot or not. A completely pointless invention!”

Bob suppressed a giggle.

“So you only read the books on dementia to be able to play the role more convincingly?” Jupiter surmised.

“How do you know what books I read?”

“We were in your house, Grandpa. We were worried! The retirement home called and wanted to know where you were, so we investigated.”

“I should have guessed,” said Ben Peck unenthusiastically.

That, in turn, caused Pete’s mood to change abruptly. “In turn, I could have guessed that you were just playing a game with them. At the latest when they all called you a ‘charming old gentleman’! You’re really impossible, Grandpa—pulling this off single-handedly! Why didn’t you come to us? You know we’re investigators!”

“Those people are dangerous, Pete,” Ben Peck said forcefully. “I didn’t want you guys involved in this, and surely not Castro or Harry. Besides, I’m better suited to investigate a retirement home than three youngsters like you... and I’ve learned from you over the years how to investigate.”

“Maybe you should tell us everything from the beginning,” Jupiter suggested.

“All right.” Ben Peck sat up straight and cleared his throat. “My old friend Neill Hooper lives on Sunny Isle. I visit him regularly. Everything was fine until one day he confided in me a secret—people go missing from the island, but not without a trace. They are transferred to other care homes.

“Neill knew three of them personally. He had met them in assisted living, but then they were later moved to the nursing ward. Neill continued to visit them there, even when they didn’t even recognize him anymore. Then suddenly they were gone.”

“—Because they couldn’t pay Sunny Isle anymore,” Jupiter said. “That’s the official reason—money... but I guess that’s only half the truth?”

“That’s right,” Mr Peck confirmed, “because Neill knew that Martha, Maria and James had actually had enough money to spend the rest of their lives on the island. However, the home’s management claimed that they had run out of money. Neill believed that someone had tampered with the assets of the three.”

“How so?” asked Pete. “They didn’t have their money hidden under the mattress, did they?”

“He suspected that someone had obtained powers of attorney over their accounts and then withdrawn all the money.”

“You’re saying that someone had obtained powers of attorney by fraud?” Bob asked. “So that he had unrestricted access to their financial transactions? But who voluntarily gives power of attorney over their accounts? You only do that if you absolutely—” Bob broke off when it dawned on him where this was going.

“—If you absolutely trust someone,” Ben Peck finished the sentence grimly. “Exactly.”

“Martha, James and Maria noticed how their mental condition deteriorated,” Jupiter surmised. “They were afraid that at some point, they would no longer be able to make the right decisions, for example, in financial transactions.”

Mr Peck nodded. "They didn't have any family members who could have taken over, but then someone came along and said: 'Don't worry, Mrs da Silva. When the time comes, I will take care of your affairs. Trust me and just sign this power of attorney and you won't have to worry anymore.'"

Jupiter remembered what Ellyn had told them about the visit permit and the precautionary measures: "Old people are easy victims for scammers. The only thing you need is trust."

Bob nodded unwillingly. "At the latest when they say: 'We're sorry, Mrs da Silva, but I'm afraid you have run out of money, so we'll have to move you to a state-run home'. Mrs da Silva would have been suspicious and say: 'That can't be so. I know very well that I still have a hundred thousand dollars in my account.'"

"Yes," Mr Peck confirmed grimly, "if she still knows. However, she wasn't moved until her dementia had progressed to the point where she didn't even know her own sister's name, not to mention the amount in her account."

"By then, the perpetrator may have had power of attorney over her account for years," Jupiter pondered aloud. "He only struck when Mrs da Silva, Mr Swift and Mrs Longingdale could no longer defend themselves. Who knows how many others were targeted?"

"What a huge mess!" said Pete grimly. "How wicked can you be! We have to put a stop to this guy! Only someone who accompanied his victims for years and had constant dealings with them comes into question—someone from the retirement home!"

"Neill came to the same conclusion," Ben Peck continued his report. "He wanted to find out who was behind it. At that point, he let me in on it. Three weeks later, he was suddenly in the nursing ward, unresponsive and asleep most of the time." Mr Peck clenched his fists and pounded on the coffee table. "I'm going to get the rascal who did this to him!"

Bob's eyes snapped open. "You mean... his health hasn't deteriorated naturally?"

"No. He got too close to the truth," Ben Peck said, "and then he was sedated—with medication."

"This is unbelievable!" cried Pete.

"Do you have any proof of this?" Jupiter enquired.

"Proof, proof! I've had enough common sense! Neill was in great shape, and three weeks later, he's lying in bed asleep all the time! That's enough proof for me!"

"So you tried to solve the crime," Pete continued, "and moved into Sunny Isle yourself."

"Right. I posed as a rich former businessman... otherwise they wouldn't have taken me in at all. Miss Martinez still thinks I'm only behind on the rent because my assets are tied up in stocks right now. I thought if I pretended to be filthy rich, I could lure the culprit... but nothing happened. No one tried to worm their way into my confidence, so I had to bring in heavier guns."

"You played the dementia patient and got yourself transferred to assisted living," Bob said. "The more confused you pretended to be, the more interesting you became to the scammer."

Ben Peck nodded. "Still no one came up to me and wanted a power of attorney from me. So I took it into my own hands and started snooping around. I guess I wasn't too clever about it. The guy caught me digging around in old files. At first, he pretended nothing was wrong, then he tried to take me out."

"Take you out?" repeated Pete, startled.

"Yes," Grandpa replied. "Just the other morning, he stood in my room and wanted to give me an injection—for my blood circulation, he claimed... but I'm sure he wanted to send me into the realm of dreams, just like he did with Neill. I tricked him and ran away. I've been on

the run ever since. I threw away my mobile phone because they say you can track those things. I thought I'd lost him, but he picked up my trail again. Just now at the hotel, I narrowly escaped him."

"Who?" asked Jupiter tensely.

"Well, Dr Burke, of course."

"Dr Burke!" shouted Pete, Bob and Jupiter at the same time.

"Yes, who else?" Mr Peck confirmed. "Everyone trusts him as he is the director of the home after all. He knows everything about all the residents. Another thing—the financial records of the residents are noted in their files. If you secretly clear out their accounts, you also have to falsify their files so that the fraud is not exposed."

"As the director of Sunny Isle, Dr Burke naturally has access to all the documents," Jupiter finished the thought. "That way, no one could find out about him."

"What a scam!" exclaimed Pete. "So Dr Burke has been following you all this time? Including all the way to the petrol station? Was he the guy who called himself Robertson?"

Ben Peck winced. "How do you know about the petrol station?"

"It was on the news, Grandpa! Didn't you know?"

"On the news?" Peck turned pale. "For goodness' sake! I didn't do anything!"

"Well, you robbed a petrol station," Jupiter pointed out.

"That's not true at all," Pete's grandfather was indignant. "It's not my fault if that idiot suddenly opens the cash register and throws his money to me!"

Bob cleared his throat uneasily. "As far as I am informed, you took the money."

"Maybe... I think it's still in the glove compartment. I was pretty stressed."

"And you had a gun with you?" Pete asked.

"That was a toy gun! I got it in case Burke threatened me—which was what happened. It's not my fault that the stupid idiot of a petrol station attendant thinks I'm a violent criminal! I mean, really! Hey, wait a minute, did you say news? Does that mean that I'm wanted by the police?"

"I'm afraid so, Grandpa."

"Well, great. Once again our dear law enforcement officers have nothing better to do than chase after righteous citizens instead of hunting down the real culprits!"

"Which brings us back to the real culprits..." Jupiter said. "Dr Burke. Do you have proof that he is behind everything?"

"That's just it," growled Mr Peck. "Otherwise I would have called the police long ago. However, I have a plan—an ingenious plan!" He leaned forward conspiratorially. "What's even better than proof? Well? That's right—a confession! And that's exactly what I'm going to get—in the morning, when the Health Department Commission visits Sunny Isle. I wanted to prepare everything there earlier but I guess I wasn't smart enough again. Burke must have suspected something because I almost got caught."

"Just a moment, Mr Peck, you were on Sunny Isle earlier?" asked Jupiter excitedly.

"Yes. Before I went back to the hotel in Santa Barbara—fled, I should say—Burke chased me all the way down to the beach."

"Did you see Burke come after you?"

"No, but who else would have followed me?"

"I did," Jupiter said. "I've been following you."

"Excuse me?"

"You were sitting in the cafeteria with a skull mask over your face, playing a newscaster from the underworld."

Ben Peck was speechless. “Yes. That was me.” He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small camcorder. “I’m afraid I lost the mask.”

Now Jupiter reached into his pocket and in turn presented the stocking mask with the skull printed on it.

Pete shook his head in confusion. “Until just now, I thought I had completely understood the case for once, but I guess not. I don’t understand anything anymore! Why on earth are you walking around a retirement home at night with a skull mask on your head?”

“Well, I already told you—to prepare my ingenious plan. The skull thing doesn’t mean anything. I needed a mask in case someone saw me. At a petrol station, they had these knitted stocking things, these demonstrator masks. Perfect, I thought—I’ll take it! I only noticed later that there was a skull printed on it.”

“Why were you on the TV screens with it?”

“That was a test! Whether the wireless transmission of the image and sound from my camera also works when I’m not in the Control Centre. How come you could you see me, Jupiter?”

“Everyone could see you, Mr Peck. Your image was transmitted to every single TV screen in the home.”

“What?” Ben Peck turned pale and he slapped a hand over his mouth. “Goodness me! On every screen? I must have pushed some wrong buttons in the Control Centre. For the test, only the TV in the cafeteria was supposed to come on!”

Jupe thought back to what the skull had said on the television screen. “So you were talking to yourself.”

“Did I? Yes, I might have... but goodness, if I was visible everywhere... then I scared the hell out of all the residents!”

Jupiter nodded. “You could say that.”

“That’s why all of a sudden, there was such a ruckus everywhere! Now I understand.”

“Hold on, hold on, hold on,” Pete said with real desperation in his voice. “I’m afraid I still don’t understand! What was that all about?”

His grandfather’s face lit up. “It’s all connected to my ingenious plan! And if you were the one who ran after me to the beach, Jupiter, then no one but us knows about it after all. That means I can still carry out the plan—preferably with your help!”

Jupiter leaned forward and put his fingertips together. “I think I speak in the interest of all present when I say that now would be the ideal time to let us in on your ingenious plan, Mr Peck!”

15. The Ingenious Plan...

The next morning, The Three Investigators and Ben Peck sat in a rickety little boat on a pier in Oxnard and took turns peering over to Sunny Isle using binoculars. They had barely slept, but had continued to develop on Ben Peck's plan into the early morning. Now everyone knew exactly what they had to do... and thanks to the excitement, everyone was wide awake.

Slowly, the sun climbed up the blue sky and burned on their skin. When a car approached the bridge, the tension grew, but it was always just normal visitors using the car park on the mainland.

"What if they're already on the island?" asked Bob.

Jupiter shook his head. "Ellyn said they'd be there at ten."

"But it's almost ten."

"Exactly. Almost ten."

"Did you actually call Ellyn this morning, Juve?" asked Pete. "Does she know what we are going to do?"

"No," Jupiter replied. "We were still asleep when she left her house for her shift. I didn't want to call her while she was on duty. Anyway, if we get to meet her afterwards, we'll quickly brief her."

"Also if anything goes wrong, try to find her," Ben Peck said. "Ellyn will help you."

"How, actually?" asked Bob. "You told Harry Jacobson that if anything went wrong he should contact Ellyn. Eventually, we learned that she couldn't tell us anything."

"I had given her a clue—the names of the three missing persons. She was the only one I trusted to solve the mystery if I got caught. She's also the only one smart enough to perhaps notice for herself that something is wrong on Sunny Isle."

Again, vehicles approached and two black BMWs did not park on the mainland, but drove over the bridge and were let through the barrier onto the island.

"That must be them!" cried Pete.

His grandfather started the engine and steered the boat towards the island. Meanwhile, Bob watched through the binoculars as a total of five men and women in business attire got out of the cars. They carried briefcases and marched towards Block 2.

Then Bob lost sight of them when Ben Peck steered the boat to the other side of the island where they could go ashore unnoticed.

"Whose boat is this anyway?" asked Pete casually.

"I don't know... but I was coping quite well with it last night."

The Second Investigator's eyes widened. "You stole this?"

"Borrowed, Pete, don't be so petty!"

Pete said nothing in reply, for they had reached the small bay. When the boat struck sand, The Three Investigators and Ben Peck climbed ashore and immediately made their way up to the home.

"Bob and Pete, your uniforms!" said Mr Peck as they saw the main entrance to Block 2 ahead of them.

Quickly, the two of them put on white coats that they had fished out of an old clothes chest in the salvage yard. Bob's was a bit too big, but in the end all that mattered was that

they were in some sort of disguise.

"Then we're ready to go," said Mr Peck. "Good luck! Mission 'Sunny Isle' begins!"

With that, Jupiter and Ben Peck turned left towards some rubbish bins, while Bob and Pete headed for the main entrance. Pete stayed back a bit so they wouldn't go into the building at the same time.

Bob entered the foyer and looked around. A short distance away stood the commission members and at that moment, they were greeted by a tall man with thinning hair and metal glasses. He had to be Dr Burke. Bob pretended to examine a notice on the notice board, and waited for the delegation to start moving.

"We'd best start on the first floor," Burke said as they walked past Bob to the lifts.

After the lift doors had closed, Bob entered the main corridor. Pete's grandpa had described the way to him in detail. The TVs on the walls showed the weather forecast—another sunny day on Sunny Isle. None of the residents Bob walked past took any notice of him. Only a tall, slim man in blue overalls who was busy with a row of flower pots glanced briefly at him, but he didn't seem to suspect anything.

When Bob reached the last door on the left, he knocked.

"Come in," came the muffled voice.

He stepped into the Control Centre. A man with thick glasses sat at a desk in front of a row of computer screens. He turned to Bob questioningly. "Yes?"

"Hello. I'm the new intern. Dr Burke sent me. He wants you in the boiler room right away. Something's wrong."

"The boiler room?" Instead of standing up, the man turned to his computers and clicked his mouse around. "What's wrong there? Everything's running, isn't it? Besides, Dr Burke told me earlier to take care of that TV broadcast that caused a huge fuss here last night. Did you catch that? It's a funny story."

Bob nodded and nervously ran his tongue over his lips. "Yes, I heard... but the commission is here right now and Dr Burke wants you to go there as soon as possible. There are some questions... but I didn't quite get it."

The technician sighed deeply and pushed himself out of his chair. "All right, then. If it's important..."

Together they left the room.

"I have to go back to Block 3," Bob said, but the man was already paying no attention to him.

Bob stayed behind, waited until the technician was out of sight and turned around. He went back into the Control Centre, closed the door and opened the window.

Jupiter and Mr Peck emerged from their hiding place outside behind the rubbish bins, rushed towards the window and climbed through.

"Well done, Bob," Mr Peck said, patting him on the back. "Did everything go smoothly?"

"Yes. The technician didn't notice anything."

Ben Peck turned to the control panel and scratched his head questioningly. "I guess I just have to repeat my mistake from yesterday. If I want all the screens to get the same broadcast, I'll just turn on the one in the cafeteria." He pressed a few buttons. "That's about it—either it works or it doesn't. If it doesn't, Bob, you'll have to figure something out somehow."

Bob swallowed. "Aye, aye, sir!"

"You will see our camera signal on this screen. To transmit it to the TV screens out there, you press this button..." Mr Peck instructed him, "but not until the show actually starts. We don't want to forewarn anyone."

“Also, make sure no one comes in here and interrupts the transmission,” Jupiter added. “We’re on our way now.”

“Follow me!” said Pete’s grandfather, before leaving the room with Juve.

Bob was left alone. He looked for a key but found none so he decided to jam a chair under the door handle. Then he sat down at the desk, fixed his eyes on the computer monitors, which still showed the weather forecast. Then he waited with a beating heart.

Pete was relieved when he finally heard footsteps on the stairs. He felt as if he had been waiting for an eternity outside the door to the boiler room.

The technician appeared at the foot of the stairs and approached him with a questioning face. “I was told there was a technical problem here. Where is Dr Burke?”

“They’re all in there,” Pete claimed, pointing to the steel door. “Dr Burke with the people from the commission. Oh, tell me, do you have your mobile phone with you?”

The man patted his pockets. “No. Why?”

“Oh, no reason.” Pete opened the door for him. A light was on in the boiler room. The heating system crackled softly.

The man entered. “Hey, there’s no one here at all.”

“No? Well, I’ll be!” Pete remarked, slamming the door from the outside and securing it with his foot. Quick as a flash, he pulled his lock pick out of his pocket and put it in the lock. He had used the few minutes he had waited to practise. It took only a moment for the lock to click into place.

“Hey!” the technician’s voice came muffled outside. “Hey, what are you doing? Open up!”

“I will free you in an hour,” Pete promised.

The man banged angrily on the door. “I will call the police!”

“You could,” Pete said, “if you had your mobile phone with you. Sorry, it’s nothing personal. It’s for a good cause! I have to go now!”

Pete left the angry man behind and scurried up the stairs. Grandpa had told him exactly where to go—to the top floor, which was the executive level.

The director’s office was at the end of a deserted corridor with thick carpeting. Jupiter and Grandpa were already waiting for him there.

“How was it?” asked Jupiter tensely.

“The technician now has time to check the heating system,” Pete said. “Did anyone see you?”

“What a question!” his grandfather complained. “I spent three weeks exploring everything here. I know the secret ways. Now let’s see what you’ve got, my grandson.” He pointed to the mahogany-coloured door. “Here’s where we have to go in!”

“Isn’t there an executive secretary in the anteroom?”

“Jupiter called her and in a disguised voice ordered her to Miss Martinez, who is supposedly waiting for her in Block 3,” his grandfather replied, “but since she’s really in Block 1, it will take a while before the deception is discovered. Actually, I wanted to set fire to the photocopier at the end of the corridor to lure her out, but I have to admit that Jupiter’s version is a bit more elegant.”

“I’m glad,” Pete said, turned his attention to the lock and had it opened within a minute. The anteroom was indeed empty. “I’ll keep my fingers crossed for you then,” he said. “I’m off now!”

The Second Investigator went to take up his post in the toilet along the corridor. With the door ajar, he could see anyone coming into the corridor. Later on, his job was to keep all uninvited visitors away from Dr Burke's office.

Jupiter and Ben Peck entered the office and looked around. There was a polished desk, soft leather chairs, some medical textbooks on a steel shelf and a life-size human plastic skeleton dangling from a metal stand.

"Perfect," Jupiter said and walked up to the bone man to remove the top of his skull. There was even a plastic brain underneath. Jupiter took it out. "We don't need this. We have enough brain matter ourselves."

Ben Peck stepped behind the desk and looked at the clunky office phone and its many buttons. He picked up the handset. "Let's see if Dr Burke will answer a call when he has such an important appointment right now."

"If he sees that the call is coming from his own office, he will," Jupe said.

Mr Peck dialled and waited. Jupiter went to him and pressed the speaker button so he could listen in on the conversation.

It rang once... it rang twice... it rang three times. Then someone picked up. "Yes?"

"This is Bennington Peck. Yes, that's right, Dr Burke—I'm the one you so desperately seek."

The director sucked in his breath. "What the—"

"I know you're terribly busy right now, Dr Burke, but if you don't get your butt back here in your office right now, I'm going to go down there and tell the commission people what I know about you and your dubious activities."

Burke spoke very quietly. "Mr Peck, this is—"

Ben Peck hung up briefly, then picked up the handset again and put it next to the phone. He grinned at Jupiter. "Now I'm quite sure that he's coming here."

16. ... Goes Wrong

Bob stared spellbound at the computer monitors. The camera signal had come in a few minutes ago. He didn't know exactly where Jupiter and Mr Peck had hidden the camcorder, but the view of Dr Burke's office was perfect.

The sound was also clear and distinct. Bob heard Pete's grandfather calling Dr Burke.

"I'm sure he's coming now," said Ben Peck. "To your post, Jupiter!"

Bob saw the First Investigator squeeze into a clothes closet and pull the door shut, while Ben Peck simply stood in the middle of the room and waited.

Suddenly someone shook the door—not in Burke's office, but here, in the Control Centre!

Bob winced.

"Open up!" said a threatening voice from outside. "Now!"

Bob jumped up in a panic. Someone was on to him! Was it the technician? Had Pete's mission failed?

Bob stared at the door. Someone kicked it from outside so hard that the chair slipped from under the handle. Bob tried to grab hold of it, but by then, the door flew open and a tall, grim figure stood before him.

It was not the technician... but the thin man in blue overalls who had caught Bob's eye earlier in the corridor!

"I knew you were up to something," the man growled. "I'm the caretaker. I know everyone here, but I've never seen you before."

"I... I'm the new intern and—"

"I still would have seen you before," the caretaker interrupted him gruffly.

"Yes, really, but I came here on very short notice. The technician asked me to keep an eye on things here as he had to go out for a moment."

"Nonsense. You're one of the two fellows who were snooping around here yesterday, aren't you?"

The caretaker's gaze fell over Bob's shoulder to a computer monitor. His eyes widened. "That's Ben Peck!"

Bob turned to the computer monitor. At that very moment, Dr Burke entered his office. He and Pete's grandfather were facing each other.

"Dr Burke!" Ben Peck's voice was heard from the loudspeaker. "How nice that you could make it!"

That was the signal. Now Bob should press the button! Right now!

"Excuse me," Bob mumbled and turned to the desk. "I just have to—" He reached for the button.

But the caretaker was quicker.

He grabbed hold of Bob's hand, slowly shaking his head and showing a row of yellow teeth. "Not so fast, my friend. Not so fast..."

When Dr Burke entered his office, Jupiter held his breath. He could see the two opponents clearly through the narrow gap in the closet door.

“Dr Burke!” said Ben Peck with mock delight. “How nice that you could make it.”

“Mr Peck...” Burke said calmly and collectedly. “So you’re back.”

“That’s right. I suppose you thought I’ve gone away for good after you didn’t catch me last night. I won’t do you that favour.”

“Catch you?” Burke repeated reproachfully. “How could you say that? I was merely concerned for your health. How glad I am to see you well!”

“Fiddle-dee-dee! I’m going to blow your cover, Dr Burke!”

“Blow my cover?”

“Yes, sir. I know all about your dubious activities. You have robbed several residents of this home of their fortunes and then deported them to state-run facilities!”

Burke shrugged regretfully. “You have a vivid imagination, Mr Peck. It’s a great gift, but it can have its downsides. In your case—”

“Don’t talk nonsense!” Ben Peck interrupted him. “Martha Longingdale, James Swift, Maria da Silva—all three of them were transferred elsewhere because they suddenly went broke.”

“It’s normal procedure,” Dr Burke countered. “I have no influence on that.”

“—But you did have an influence on their account balances.”

“Mr Peck...” Burke now spoke as gently as if he was trying to soothe a small child. “I realize you really believe that, but there is no conspiracy. All of us here at Sunny Isle work to make sure you and your fellow residents have as pleasant a retirement as possible... and we’re happy to do it!”

Jupiter felt a bead of sweat run down his back. This conversation was not going as they had imagined.

Mr Peck also seemed to notice this. He looked increasingly nervous. “I know what is happening!” he insisted, “and I can prove it too! You falsified the files. I went to the basement archives and looked at them. You think you left no traces, but anyone who knows what to look for can spot the forgeries right away.”

That was a shot in the dark. Jupiter knew that neither Ben Peck nor The Three Investigators had any evidence. However, the bluff had an effect—a brief wave of uncertainty seemed to grip Dr Burke before he regained his composure.

“I’m going to the commission people now and tell them everything I know!” threatened Ben Peck.

“All right,” Dr Burke said meekly, stepping towards Pete’s grandfather. “What do you say I go with you to see them, Mr Peck? Together we’ll see how to resolve the situation.”

Jupiter only saw the syringe that Dr Burke pulled out of the pocket of his doctor’s coat at the last moment. The doctor put his hand on Mr Peck’s shoulder seemingly in a caring manner—and stuck the syringe into his upper arm!

The First Investigator had to force himself to remain still and watch as Ben Peck gave a short groan, contorted his face in disbelief, grabbed his arm—and slumped down.

Dr Burke caught him and lay him down on the desk chair. He looked coldly at the motionless Ben Peck, took a deep breath, massaged his neck briefly and pulled his mobile phone out of his pocket. He dialled and waited impatiently as he paced up and down his office.

“At last!” he shouted angrily. “Peck showed up. He said he had proof that the residents’ files were tampered with... Yes, if I do say so! Anyway, I was able to put him down. He’s no longer a threat. We should still get rid of the files, just in case... Just go do it! I have to go back to the commission members, and I don’t want to arouse suspicion. See you then!”

Angrily he hung up and looked at Mr Peck with a contemptuous expression on his face. “Damn fool!”

Jupiter concluded that they now had what they wanted, so he opened the closet door and stepped out.

Dr Burke whirled around and stared at him in horror. “Hey! What are you doing in my closet?”

“Nothing. I watched and overheard you.”

“It... it wasn’t like...” Burke struggled helplessly for words, but finally his expression darkened. “No one will believe you.”

“I’m afraid you misjudge that,” Jupe said calmly. “Everyone will believe me. No doubt you were told this morning about the strange TV broadcast that occurred last night. Do you know what that meant?” Jupiter did not wait for an answer. “That was a test run—for this!” The First Investigator pointed to the skeleton in the corner of the room. “Why don’t you look your bony friend in the eye and say hello to your audience?”

With pure horror, Dr Burke discovered the small flashing light of the camcorder stuck in the plastic skull of the skeleton, filming through the right eye socket.

However, the horror did not last long. A malicious smile crept across Burke’s face. “You’re bluffing.”

“I’m not.”

“Yes, you are, because if that were true, someone would have been here by now.”

“Mr Peck’s grandson is out in the corridor preventing anyone from coming in here.”

However, Dr Burke was not to be ruffled. “I still don’t believe you.” He held up his mobile phone. “—Because I would have known from my phone call a while ago.”

Jupiter swallowed. Burke’s logic could not be dismissed. Had their ingenious plan failed?

17. The Accomplice

Pete had waited behind the ajar toilet door in the corridor of the executive floor until Dr Burke had passed him and entered his office. Then the Second Investigator had stepped into the corridor.

And there he still stood, ready to intervene if necessary, in case someone came—in particular, someone who had seen the video transmission somewhere in the building and now wanted to warn Dr Burke. The whole mission finally depended on Dr Burke making a full confession before he realized that the whole residence was listening in.

However, no one came.

The Second Investigator had a bad feeling. He decided to leave his post for a short moment. He ran to the end of the corridor, around the corner, until he reached a window from which he could look out into the park, and into the large window of the cafeteria two floors below him.

He saw the TV screen on the wall, but it showed neither Grandpa nor Jupiter nor Dr Burke, but the advertising video.

Something had gone wrong!

What now? What was he supposed to do? He had to go to Bob to see what was going on!

Pete sprinted back down the long corridor to the stairwell. Less than ten metres away was Burke's office. Pete hesitated. A few seconds of delay no longer mattered.

He ran to the director's office, quietly opened the door to the anteroom and peeked in. There was nobody there so he crept in and carefully put his ear to the office door. He could clearly hear Dr Burke's voice: "What do you say I go with you to see them, Mr Peck? Together we'll see how to resolve the situation."

A strangled scream was heard, then a rumble.

Pete's hand was already on the door handle, but he forced himself to remain calm. Jupiter was in there. He should have everything under control—for sure!

"At last!" he heard Burke's voice again. "Peck showed up. He said he had proof that the residents' files were tampered with... Yes, if I do say so! Anyway, I was able to put him down. He's no longer a threat. We should still get rid of the files, just in case... Just go do it! I have to go back to the commission members, and I don't want to arouse suspicion. See you then!"

Pete could not believe his ears. Burke had an accomplice!

"Damn fool!" muttered Burke. A moment later, there was a startled gasp. "Hey! What are you doing in my closet?"

"Nothing. I watched and overheard you."

Jupiter. Finally! Jupiter would master the situation, and Pete could now break away. He had to get to Bob and get the video transmission going! And he had to catch Burke's accomplices!

The Second Investigator spurted off and ran down the stairs to the ground floor. In the main corridor, he ran past the people from the commission who were currently in Nurse Beatrice's company. They all looked at him in amazement.

Pete had half-crossed the corridor when suddenly the TV screens on the wall went black for a split second and then Dr Burke, Jupiter and his grandpa appeared on them. Bob had done it!

But then Pete was thunderstruck and stopped. His grandfather was lying motionless on a chair!

Gradually, the residents in the corridor and the people from the commission also noticed that something unusual was happening. Even more so when Burke's and Jupiter's voices could be heard like a choir from a multitude of loudspeakers. Everyone looked spellbound at the TV screens.

"You don't have any proof, do you?" Dr Burke's voice was heard from the TV.

"Your fraud will be exposed," Jupiter replied grimly. "Everyone will know that you stole from several residents and then deported them. You won't get away with it, Dr Burke!"

Even on the TV, the audience could see the coldness in Burke's smile. "Well, we'll see about that!"

Suddenly Burke leapt forward, knocked Jupiter over and pinned him to the ground. A syringe sparkled in his hand! A shocked murmur went through the corridor. The members of the commission could not believe their eyes as they watched the desperate struggle of the two on the screens.

Pete suppressed the impulse to rush to Jupiter's aid immediately. He had to trust that one of the countless eyewitnesses would take over. Already he saw Nurse Beatrice hurrying away.

Pete's mission was different. He had to catch Burke's accomplice before he was done with the files! He ran to the stairwell and down the stairs to the basement.

He was lucky. At the fourth door he reached, the sign 'Archives' was emblazoned outside. He listened and then carefully pushed down the handle. It was locked, but the lock was no problem for him.

Inside, it was pitch dark. Pete briefly switched on the light to get his bearings. It was a low basement room, with fluorescent tubes under the ceiling illuminating long rows of steel shelves filled with folders.

Pete locked up again from the inside, turned off the light and groped his way to the back shelf aisle, where he lay flat on his stomach. With his heart pounding, he waited.

It seemed like an eternity, but a glance at the faintly glowing dial of his watch told him that only three minutes had passed. Then he heard something happened at the door.

It was opened. The fluorescent lights flared up, but Pete, lying on the floor, could only peek under the shelves. All he saw was a pair of white sandals.

The person now entered one of the middle aisles and stopped. A file folder was pulled out and opened. Pete had to catch him in the act—and it was now or never!

As quietly as possible, he got up, crept to the aisle in question and peered around the corner.

Then he gasped. "You!"

The folder slipped out of Ellyn's hand in shock. It fell to the floor with a smack. Pete could read the name 'Maria da Silva' on the spine of the folder.

"I... I..." Ellyn stammered.

"I don't believe it!" gasped Pete. "You're the accomplice! You robbed the old people of their fortune!"

Ellyn did not respond.

Pete was stunned when he realized the full extent of the betrayal. "You've been lying to us all along! When we surprised you at Grandpa's house, you really did look for him—but

not because you were worried, but because you wanted to shut him up! And from then on, you only pretended to help us. In reality, you were watching us!”

Then Pete recalled something from the previous afternoon when they had caught Ellyn in Grandpa’s garden. “So that’s how Burke knew which hotel to find Grandpa... because you had overheard Bob’s call from Santa Barbara! I could hear what he was saying to Jupe because the phone was so loud, and you could too.” Pete narrowed his eyes. “How can you be so low!”

“Vile,” Ellyn repeated bitterly. “You have no idea.”

“Oh no? What do I have to know to understand this?”

“Do you know what I earn here as a nurse?”

Pete exploded with anger. “So that’s why you steal from old people who have saved all their lives for someone to take care of them in their old age because no one else will?”

“It doesn’t make a real difference to them,” Ellyn argued. “Do you think it matters to them whether they are living here at Sunny Isle or in some other homes? In fact, they don’t even know they are in a home anymore!”

The Second Investigator was so angry that he could hardly hold on to himself. He was shaking all over. “You will pay for this!”

But Ellyn smiled coldly. “I won’t need to... because you can’t prove anything.”

“We have a confession from Dr Burke! It just went out on all the TVs, as you would have probably noticed.”

“What have I got to do with that? I’m here in the archives for something completely different. There’s nothing illegal about that. I work here after all. I’m sorry for you, Pete—you have no proof.”

“The boy has nothing to prove,” said a voice behind them.

Ellyn and Pete winced and turned around. Standing in the open doorway was the caretaker... and Bob.

“Bob!” cried Pete in relief.

“We heard every word and can testify to everything,” Bob announced with confidence.

“By the way, also every word that was spoken in Burke’s office before I pressed the button for the transmission,” the caretaker added. Together they entered the room.

Ellyn Djawadi turned pale and no longer spoke a word.

Footsteps approached in the basement corridor. Pete heard Nurse Beatrice’s voice echoing off the concrete walls: “When I said this shot would get you back on your feet, I didn’t mean you could march right down to the basement, Mr Peck! You need to lie down right now!”

“Don’t talk nonsense, Nurse Beatrice, I feel great. The shot was great. I feel a bit like floating, a bit like when I was at Woodstock. Do you have any more?”

Then all three of them appeared in the doorway—Nurse Beatrice, Jupiter and Ben Peck, who let them both support him.

Irritated, Ben looked around. “Pete! Ellyn! You got him! The caretaker did it! Oh my goodness!”

Pete shook his head silently and pointed at Ellyn.

Ben Peck turned pale, his legs sagging away. “I... I think I’d like to lie down now after all.”

Jupiter quickly pulled up a chair that was placed at a small metal desk in the corner. Mr Peck sat down.

“Jupe!” murmured Pete. “What about Dr Burke? I saw him trying to put you to sleep!”

“On the contrary... he’s now asleep himself,” Jupiter said contentedly. “In the end, I’m not as defenceless as everyone thinks.”

Pete turned to his grandfather, but he only stared at Ellyn—shocked and disappointed beyond measure. “Ellyn,” he said tonelessly. “I can’t believe it. I trusted you!”

Jupe nodded slowly. “And that was exactly the point.”

Ellyn could not return the look. She remained silent until the police took her away an hour later together with Dr Burke.

18. Party at the Crenshaws

A few days later, the Crenshaw family's living room smelled of pipe smoke. This did not suit Pete very well. He hoped that the smell would have dissipated by the time his parents returned tomorrow.

The occasion was a party that his grandfather had insisted on throwing. It was Pete's idea to hold the party here—in his house. After all, he had hardly taken advantage of being home alone. This was the last opportunity.

The stench of the place was not caused by The Three Investigators, of course, but by their illustrious guests.

Everyone who had been invited had come—Mr Castro and Harry Jacobson; Mrs Penny and Mr Turner, even if the latter didn't really know where he was, but it didn't matter, he had fun anyway. The caretaker from Sunny Isle was there, as was the petrol station attendant from Ventura, who had got his money back along with the invitation. The guest of honour was Neill Hooper—awake, bouncy and in full possession of his mental faculties.

One or the other had a beer in front of them and Mr Hooper was taking a whiff of his pipe with relish. It stank terribly, but it was for 'therapeutic purposes' as he claimed.

Since many of the people present were hard of hearing, they all shouted at each other. This in turn prompted Ben Peck to turn up the oldies he had put on louder and louder—which made everyone scream even louder. Pete was already wondering when the neighbours would complain... but somehow, he didn't care.

"Man, that was something!" Bennington Peck shouted and slammed his open beer bottle down on the table so hard that it started foaming inside. The foam overflowed and left a puddle on the table, but Pete's grandfather didn't even notice. "What a great adventure! Now I know why my capable grandson and his friends are investigators! I think I'll become one too!"

"And I slept through all the fun," Mr Hooper complained. "I slept through it all!"

"How are you now, Mr Hooper?" enquired Bob.

"Fantastic! My body has broken down the sleeping pills that were given to me every day—from Nurse Beatrice, I suppose. Everything's been fine ever since!" He blew out a cloud of smoke.

"We're very pleased to hear that!" affirmed Bob, suppressing a cough.

"Nurse Beatrice, I never liked her anyway," Mrs Penny spoke up. "She's got something against me—just like Mrs Pommeroy."

"There's one thing you might want to know, Mr Hooper. We have since found out that Nurse Beatrice is innocent," Jupiter said. "It wasn't her who gave you a strong sleeping pill every day, but Dr Burke himself. She believed all along that you were really ill. Besides, Burke had told her to let him know if you had any visitors, but she didn't know what it was really about. Incidentally, the sleeping pill dose was increased the night I was at Sunny Isle with Miss Djawadi. It was the only way Burke could be sure that my plan to talk to you again was guaranteed not to work... and Ellyn could safely continue her role as a noble helper."

Ben Peck snatched up his bottle. He was clearly already a bit drunk. "To Burke, the old crook with his very slow red Mercedes, who I could easily outrun every time! And of course

to the lovely Ellyn, the fake snake! Without those two, the most exciting weeks of my life wouldn't have happened!"

"You're impossible!" Harry Jacobson complained, shaking his head.

"Oh come on, Harry, old geezer," Ben shouted, slapping his friend hard on the back. "It was fun, wasn't it?"

Suddenly Mr Turner, who had been sitting silently in the corner listening all evening, rose from his chair, straightened to his full height of over six feet and shouted: "*To ears of flesh and blood. List, list, O, list!*"

At the same moment, the door opened and Pete's parents appeared in the doorway. No one had heard them approach the house.

"Pop!" cried Mrs Crenshaw in horror, staring at her father in bewilderment. Then she turned to her son. "Pete! What on earth is going on?"

"Where... where did you come from?" asked Pete, puzzled. "You were supposed to come back tomorrow..."

"Today, my son, today!"

"Uh-oh!" the First Investigator murmured.

"Now we're in trouble," Bob whispered to the First Investigator.

Mrs Crenshaw put her hands to her hips angrily. "You really can't be left alone for five minutes!"

Mr Crenshaw put his hand on his wife's shoulder reassuringly. "You mean you didn't expect Pete to have a party while we were away, did you?"

"I'm not talking about Pete! I'm talking about my dear father! Or do you think Pete would invite a bunch of pensioners?"

"I beg your pardon!" said Mr Castro indignantly.

"Come here, my daughter!" Ben Peck interrupted. "And you too, my son-in-law! Come here, come here, come here! The evening is too beautiful for petty quarrels! Sit down!"

Shortly afterwards, Pete's parents were seated among the guests in the living room.

"And now," Bennington Peck announced, "I'll tell you how this party came about!"